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## **Rethinking Javanese Islam. Towards new descriptions of Javanese traditions**

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### **Citation**

Boogert, J. W. P. van den. (2015, November 18). *Rethinking Javanese Islam. Towards new descriptions of Javanese traditions*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/36400>

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**Author:** Boogert, Jochem van den

**Title:** Rethinking Javanese Islam. Towards new descriptions of Javanese traditions

**Issue Date:** 2015-11-18

# Rethinking Javanese Islam.

Towards new descriptions of  
Javanese traditions.

Proefschrift  
ter verkrijging van  
de graad van Doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden  
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus, prof. mr. C.J.J.M. Stolker  
volgens besluit van het College voor Promoties  
te verdedigen op woensdag 18 november 2015  
klokke 15.00 uur

door  
Jochem van den Boogert  
geboren te Ermelo  
in 1971

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prof. dr. E.P. Wieringa (Universität zu Köln)





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## Acknowledgements

It would have been impossible to make this dissertation without the help of the following persons, all of whom I would like to thank. In the very first place I need to thank Lies, for having my back, especially through all the rough patches. Mother, for your relentless and unconditional support. Father, perhaps my dreams are actually yours. Oscar and Sebastiaan, for being Oscar and Sebastiaan. Danny, for hearing me out whenever necessary. Bartelijne, you are a rock. Dr. Guus Boone, for painstakingly scrutinising all my chapters and giving me your honest-to-god opinion. Sandra Sardjono, for reading my manuscript and confronting me with your criticism. Johnny Stephen, for challenging my arguments. Professor Ayu Sutarto and Ibu Ninik, for your great generosity. Yando and Nita, for your boundless hospitality. Bapak Paul Barnstijn, Endang P. Rahayu and Lisa Nurhayati, for welcoming me (back) to Java. Mas Paul and Dewi, for being a gateway to Yogya. Sandeep Shetty and Jose Lopez, for being there at the root of this enterprise. Balu, for selflessly helping me and giving me more than I asked for, even when I didn't know what it was I was asking for. All of you, I am both happy and grateful for your help and kindness.



## Introduction

This dissertation focuses on the study of Javanese Islam, and not on Javanese Islam per se. It is an investigation into an academic discipline and thus from the beginning situates itself on a meta-level. Its empirical data are academic sources and not original fieldwork. It looks at our current understanding of Javanese Islam, within the academia and in our common sense. It examines the theoretical problems involved in this understanding, the historical and epistemological roots of the concepts involved, and several key issues that have both sparked and debilitated the debate on Javanese Islam. Finally, it also hints at new avenues for future research. It however does not offer a new interpretation or understanding of Javanese Islam, for reasons that will become apparent throughout the following chapters.

My investigation is born out of more fundamental research that has been initiated by S.N. Balagangadhara and is being further developed by him and his teams at Ghent University and Kuvempu University. It seems fitting therefore to reiterate the point of departure in the introduction of his *The Heathen in his Blindness...* :

“Consider the following three statements: (a) Christianity has profoundly influenced the western culture; (b) members from different cultures seem to experience many aspects of the world differently; (c) the empirical and theoretical study of culture in general and religion in particular emerged within the West. In the present study, I try to show that these generally accepted truisms have implications for the conceptualisation of religion and culture.” (Balagangadhara 1994: 5)

This quote sums up along which lines I have written my dissertation. In the course of the following chapters these three ‘truisms’ will appear, albeit not always explicitly, time and again as guiding themes.

Chapter one sets the stage as it localises Javanese Islam within the scholarly field of Javanese Studies. ‘Javanese Islam’ is a central concept to Javanese Studies as it is both the subject of study, in for example ethnography or philology, as well as a constitutive concept in other kinds of re-

search of Java, such as e.g. sociological or political analyses. If I am permitted a hyperbole: without the concept of 'Javanese Islam' Javanese Studies would hardly be possible. My research starts with the observation of the way in which scholars of Javanese Studies use this concept. My intention thus is not to describe Javanese Islam, but to describe how it is generally understood. Subsequently, I identify a number of theoretical problems surrounding the notion of syncretist Javanese Islam, which makes the representation of Javanese religion in terms of syncretism deeply suspect. This leads us to the question as to how it is possible that the current discourse on Javanese Islam holds on to a concept that cannot but be a misrepresentation of Javanese reality.

I approach this question by looking at the origins of the discourse on Javanese Islam. These origins are to be located in the Western enterprise of making sense of non-Western cultures. Thus, both historically and conceptually 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' are the result of an encounter between two cultures. An encounter in which one culture, the West, has taken it upon itself to describe the other, the Javanese culture. Chapters two to five describe this process in terms of a conceptual genealogy. Chapter two deals specifically with travel accounts from broadly speaking 1500 until 1800 CE. They show us that the very first descriptions we have of Javanese religion are in fact from the hands of Western visitors to Java. These accounts are the first in a chain of interlinking descriptions of religion in Java. Chapter three treats the next link in this chain: the descriptions of Javanese religion by early 19th century orientalists. This phase represents the beginning of the scientific study of Javanese culture and religion. Taken together, chapter two and three illustrate the third truism above: the study of culture and of religion in particular, and in this case of culture and religion in Java, emerged within the West. In chapter four and five we discover that the concepts 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' were coined by Protestant missionaries in the course of the second half of the 19th century. Their definition of these concepts in terms of syncretism is the same as those being used today by various prominent scholars from Javanese Studies. The sole difference being that the missionaries considered this Javanese religion a degenerate kind of religion, while today syncretist Javanese religion is considered much more positively.



In each phase of the genealogy I devote attention to the structuring concepts used to describe religion in Java and to the conceptual framework within which these descriptions made sense. Since both the conceptual framework and the structuring concepts are Christian theological in nature, the relevance of the first truism -Christianity has profoundly influenced Western culture- becomes apparent. Given the fact that the study of Javanese religion was initiated and developed by members of Western culture, we would expect nothing less than these descriptions to bear the mark of a Western framework. What the genealogy shows is that the constant in these descriptions is Christian theology. In fact, syncretist 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' turn out to be just that: pieces of Christian theology. Consequently, the argument in this dissertation presents an alternative to that from post-colonial scholarship which sees syncretist Javanese Islam as a misrepresentation on the part colonial orientalists, a misrepresentation as a function of the colonial power-knowledge nexus.

Here we run into one of the dividing topics within the discourse on Javanese religion. Is Javanese Islam truly Islam, i.e. a local Islam, or merely an Islamic facade covering an animist or Hindu-Buddhist religious belief system? Chapter six discusses this point together with the assessment of Islam in Java by Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, the most well-known and influential orientalist of the Netherlands. It is a particular case of irony that his take on Islam in Java, which opposes the syncretist standpoint, prefigured that of the post-colonial scholars of today. An analysis of his argument shows how this discussion on the nature of Javanese Islam is in fact a matter that can only be solved within Islamic theological thought. Being outside of the scholarly scope, this topic turns out to be a pseudo-debate. Moreover, it shows that the proposed substitution of syncretist 'Javanese Islam' with 'local Islam' does not solve the theoretical problems as sketched in the first chapter. Not only does the second concept come with its own set of theoretical problems, the two concepts turn out to refer to two different phenomena.

At this point the dissertation switches to a more theoretical level. As the conceptual genealogy of Javanese Islam and Javanism seems to indicate, there is an absence of actual empirical and theoretical evidence as to the existence of a syncretist Javanese religion. This realisation makes us question what exactly the concept of Javanese Islam refers to in Javanese

reality. I begin chapter seven with the proposal that ‘Javanese Islam’ is an experiential entity: the concepts syncretist Javanese Islam and Javanism actually refer to an entity in the experience of the West, but not to an entity in Javanese reality. Here we tie in with the second truism: members of different cultures experience many aspects of the world differently. My research thus proposes that syncretist ‘Javanese Islam’ is a concept with which the West managed to render intelligible its experience of certain aspects of Javanese reality. This suggestion allows us to understand why, despite its theoretical flaws, scholars of Javanese Studies have continued to speak of ‘Javanese Islam’: it confirmed their experience of Javanese culture. It also allows us to ask the following question, one that opens new avenues for research: if ‘Javanese Islam’ does not refer to an entity in Javanese reality, then what has the West been describing?

In chapter seven and eight, instead of an answer, I offer partial re-descriptions of three phenomena in Javanese culture that have functioned as essential building blocks to our current understanding of Javanese religion: *agama*, *slametan*, and *ngelmu*. For these re-descriptions I employ a heuristic drawn from Balagangadhara’s hypothesis on cultures as configurations of learning. That is to say, from the same sources that have been employed to construct ‘Javanese Islam’ and ‘Javanism’ I draw an alternative description of *agama* as an instance of tradition, of *slametan* as praxis, and of *ngelmu* as practical knowledge. Maximally, these partial re-descriptions give an indication of what an alternative understanding of Javanese culture might look like, as they open up new avenues for research into Javanese culture. Minimally, this analysis gives substance to the claim that syncretist ‘Javanese Islam’ is but an experiential entity.

In more ways than one Balagangadhara’s hypothesis has guided the research carried out in this dissertation. It uses in a non-trivial sense the suggestion that cultures differ in different ways. I have taken as a guiding principle the insight that what constitutes a salient difference for one culture does not necessarily do so for another. In the words of Sarah Claerhout, who also relies on Balagangadhara’s hypotheses for her research, *in casu* the issue of conversion in India:

“I want to emphasize that this hypothesis is really what the word suggests: it is speculative and tentative; formulated to solve problems that have arisen. It is also heuristically productive in the sense

that it appears to suggest unexpected answers, each of which has to be investigated further.” (Claerhout 2010: 381)

To some readers these answers and arguments, at least the way I have presented them in this introduction, might have a familiar ring. And one might wonder what the novelty or added value of my own research is in comparison to what has already been investigated. I will discuss this with reference to three contemporary scholars. Firstly, there is the investigation executed by Karel Steenbrink (1993) regarding the Dutch or colonial reception of Islam in Indonesia. Steenbrink’s focus is on the evaluation of Indonesian Islam (and thus also of Javanese Islam) by successive generations of colonial scholarship. His conclusion is, perhaps no longer surprising in this post-colonial era, that overall the Dutch evaluated Islam in Java in a negative way. Although my research shares a historical perspective with Steenbrink’s, in the end his work is not concerned with the way the Dutch constructed Javanese Islam. Steenbrink regards Indonesian Islam (c.q. Javanese Islam) as a given and his research does not question, neither epistemologically nor ontologically, this entity. Secondly, a more recent study by Michael Laffan (2011) aims to discuss precisely that: how Indonesian Islam (and thus also Javanese Islam) was represented in the orientalist discourse. Laffan’s research is critical of the notion of a syncretist Javanese Islam, i.e. an Islam that is tolerant and thus supposedly more amenable to colonial hegemony. His research focuses especially on the role of Sufism and the *tariqa* (Sufi brotherhoods) in the orientalist representation of Indonesian, c.q. Javanese Islam, which was, according to Laffan, informed by reformist Muslims. Although the dissertation at hand generally speaking shares Laffan’s criticism on orientalist scholarship, it looks elsewhere for an explanation of the misrepresentation inherent to the concept of syncretist Javanese Islam, as I have pointed out above. Thirdly, my research might seem to present an argument similar to that of Talal Asad, whose scholarship resonates strongly in contemporary anthropology. One of the threads in his research is his approach of the prevalent universalist definitions of religion as part of a particular language game, i.e. of a Western language game, and that despite being a product of the Enlightenment it carries Christian assumptions (Asad 1993: 27-54). He criticises universalist definitions of religion, such as Clifford Geertz’s, for being theological, i.e. it treats religion as *sui generis*. Asad, however, argues that religion should be regarded in relation to the social sphere. That is to say, a religion is the result of specific so-

cial and political systems (of power structures if you will). Consequently, Asad proposes not to study a specific religion, but rather unpack that religion into its heterogeneous elements. Despite the merits of Asad's approach, and the resemblance of his claims to the ones put forward here, my research actually takes a different route. I do offer a genealogy, but it is primarily focused on the concept of Javanese Islam, its conceptual structure, and the conceptual framework it fits in. I do include historical circumstances in this analysis but, as will become clear in the following chapters, I argue that the emergence or crystallisation of the concept of Javanese Islam itself owes very little to the presence of specific power structures. Neither do I "unpack" Javanese Islam into its heterogeneous elements -my analysis of *slametan* and *ngelmu* should not be regarded as such- but rather I raise doubts as to the actual existence of syncretist Javanese Islam. In conclusion then, the dissertation presented here could be seen as exploring the uncharted territory between the fields of research of these three scholars.





## 1. The concept of Javanese Islam and its place in Javanese Studies

Within Javanese Studies, despite the diversity of disciplines it harbours, 'Javanese Islam' is one of the constitutive concepts. It is so for two main reasons. Firstly, Javanese Islam itself has been and still is the focus of a great number of works that try to explain its nature, its different appearances, its historical evolution, its relation to other religions, and so on. Secondly, the concept of Javanese Islam underpins so much other research in the field of Javanese studies, that it is no exaggeration to claim that this concept is essential to the scholarly knowledge of the life and minds of the Javanese.

What should we understand by Javanese Studies? It has become something of a trivium to point out how the legacy of the colonial enterprise stretches to this day. We all acknowledge how that enterprise not only encompassed the West's mercantile and political strongholds across the globe, but also its intellectual dominance. Historically speaking, it is the West that has furnished the academic disciplines with which we have come to study and make sense of the world's non-Western cultures. These disciplines were originally anchored in philology and ethnography. The first favoured texts as the primary entry point into non-Western cultures, the second privileged firsthand experience. After all, colonial power needed knowledge about its dominions. In the post-colonial period, both in its political and academic sense, the academic study of non-Western cultures seems to become increasingly the prerogative of Area Studies. By bringing together scholars from different disciplines from the humanities -usually with the philologists or anthropologists as the true area specialists- a specific geographical area is opened to interdisciplinary research. In that sense we have Latin American Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Pacific Studies, but also European Studies or North American Studies. Within these fields there are subfields: in Southeast Asian Studies there is the subfield of Indonesian Studies and subsequently Javanese Studies (Javanology). When I speak of Javanese Studies in this and the following chapters, it will be approximately in this sense: the

scholarly study of that area of the island of Java where the culture is (pre-dominantly) Javanese.

Arguably the most prevalent understanding of Javanese Islam, or at least the one with the longest pedigree, is as a syncretist mix of beliefs and practices from Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, animism and ancestor worship. The idea that the Javanese adhere to this syncretist religion is so pervasive that we find it entrenched in the literature on Javanese culture, Javanese politics, Javanese socio-economics, and so forth. John D. Legge, for example, explains president Sukarno's unifying political capabilities by referring to the syncretism inherent in Javanese culture. In his view Sukarno was very much part of the traditional Javanese worldview that is characterised by "eclecticism" and "tolerance" (Legge 1973 [1972]: 9-13). Similarly, Benedict Anderson's account of the Javanese conception of power depends on the idea of a "dynamic syncretism" typical for Javanese thinking (Anderson 1972: 15). In fact, Anderson suggests "that the logic of the Javanese traditional conception of power required a center, *syncretic* and absorptive in character, and that this center was usually realized in the person of a ruler." (ibid.: 62; italics mine). In Niels Mulder's report on Javanese society and culture, Javanese syncretism also emerges as a constitutive concept. In Mulder's eyes, the religious stance of the Javanese is such that it allows for the incorporation of all kinds of elements from different religious and spiritual discourses:

"Some generously mix in Moslem ideas with the Hindu-Buddhist heritage from the period that preceded the advent of Islam, others juxtapose Catholicism, ancestor worship and theosophy, while others still relish combining cannibalism, freemasonry and Javanese concepts of biology, without ever bothering for a moment about questions of compatibility. This licence is often called *syncretism*." (Mulder 2005 [1994]: 110; italics mine).

We find that the same concept underlies many other varying accounts, such as Patrick Guinness' discussion of community construction in urban low-level settlements (Guinness 2009). Or consider Ward Keeler's anthropological study of Javanese shadow theatre that relies on the comments of his informants, whom he calls "syncretist Javanese" (Keeler 1987: 40-41). If these examples show anything, it is at least the level to which the concept of a syncretist Javanese religion has become an intricate part of our understanding of Java.



### 1.1. The textbook story: the discourse of Javanese Islam

The standard textbook story usually sets Javanese Islam apart from what it often calls ‘international’, ‘pure’, ‘pious’, or ‘legalistic’ Islam. Javanese Islam is thus considered typical for Java and recognisably different from this other Islam -regardless of what it is called. Therefore, the concept ‘Javanese Islam’ refers to a distinct religion which should be regarded as an entity in itself.

How is this distinct Javanese religion described? Consider the following random quotes from scholars who take quite different stances towards the phenomenon of Javanese Islam. In the first quote we see in what terms Mark Woodward describes Mbah Maridjan, arguably one of the most famous contemporary Javanese Muslims. Until his death in 2010 Mbah Maridjan was tied to the Yogyakarta court and was, amongst other things, in charge of the yearly *Labuhan* ceremonies at mount Merapi where sacrifices to the spirits of Mount Merapi are made (e.g. Bigeon 1982; Schlehe 1996). In the words of Woodward:

“He [Mbah Maridjan] was a deeply religious man in a very Javanese way. He was *a pious Muslim and deeply attached to Javanese tradition (...)* Mbah Maridjan’s Islam was local.” (Woodward 2010; italics mine)

In the course of the thesis we will discuss the relevance of the claim that Javanese Islam is a “local” or “native Islam” (e.g. Florida 1997). For now it suffices to notice that in the eyes of Woodward a Javanese Muslim is someone who besides being a “pious Muslim” also adheres to Javanese tradition. We find a similar characterisation in Fauzan Saleh’s authoritative work on 20th century Islamic theological discourse in Indonesia. Here he characterises the Javanese Muslim as follows:

“*The Javanese Muslims did not refrain from advocating many religious concepts alien to other Muslims from outside their cultural domain. They believed in supernatural beings, performed many religious ceremonies not prescribed by the “official” religious doctrines of Islam, and were more inclined to mystical Hindu-Buddhist beliefs.*” (Saleh 2001: 19; italics mine)

In Saleh’s characterisation the Javanese Muslim, besides practising Islam, also adheres to religious traditions and beliefs from religions other than

Islam, viz. Hinduism and Buddhism. We find the same depiction in Koentjaraningrat's seminal *Javanese culture*:

“... [besides adhering to the tenets of Islam] these Javanese Muslims also believe in a great many other religious concepts, supernatural beings, and powers, and *they also perform many religious ceremonies, which have little connection with the official religious doctrines of Islam.*” (Koentjaraningrat 1989 [1985]: 317; italics mine)

What makes Javanese Islam so Javanese, so the standard story goes, is that it blends beliefs and practices from Islam with beliefs and practices from the religions that preceded Islam in Java, viz. Hinduism, Buddhism, animism and ancestor worship. This is partly the result of on the one hand Java's unique history that has known successive periods of Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic cultural-religious dominance and, on the other hand, of the Javanese culture or mind that is said to be characteristically accommodating for influences from the outside. The Javanese mind or culture is said to have a knack for absorbing and reworking, i.e. syncretising, such external influences into something recognisably Javanese (e.g. Zoetmulder 1967: 16; Ricklefs 2006: 4-6).

If we read the history of Java as a succession of different religions, then the period before the arrival of Hinduism -which is thought to have arrived as early as the 1st century C.E.- is considered to be a period during which the religion of the Javanese consisted of a form of ancestor worship and animism. Subsequently, from about the 4th century until about the 16th century CE,<sup>1</sup> a succession of mainly Hindu but also Buddhist kingdoms ruled Java. The presence of such kingdoms as Medang (or Mataram), Shailendra, Kediri, Singosari and Majapahit are seen as indications that the Javanese were Hindu-Buddhist before the arrival of Islam. However, the standard story has it, they were so in a Javanese way. After all, the Javanese syncretist mind appropriated, and reworked these religions, thereby turning it into something Javanese. Nor had the Javanese completely jettisoned the animist religion and ancestor worship: elements of these religions remained present. Although the earliest testimonies of Javanese who were Muslim date back to 1368-69 CE, it is the defeat of the Hindu Majapahit by the Islamic Demak, around 1527, that truly marked the transition of Hinduism to Islam (Ricklefs 2001: 5, 22, 36-58).

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<sup>1</sup> All dates are Common Era (CE), unless otherwise indicated.

Of course, so the story goes, the Javanese did not just convert to Islam, they reworked Islam in a Javanese way -as they had done with Hinduism and Buddhism- and retained certain elements of all the previous religions as well. Subsequently, from the 16th century onwards, with the dominance of the Javanese-Islamic Mataram, and ultimately the conquest of Blambangan -i.e. the last Javanese-Hindu kingdom on Java- it is said Java became completely (Javanese) Islamic. With a couple of notable exceptions, such as the Badui in the West and the Tenggerese in East of Java, the whole island is considered to have converted to Islam from about 1800 onwards. This Javanese Islam has been compared to a layer cake: each prior religion has left a residue that was recuperated by the following religion, eventually resulting in a layered Javanese Islam (e.g. Partonadi 1988: 18-19). The level to which the Javanese culture has its own great tradition or to what level its greatness has been imported is a contested issue (e.g. Kumar 2006). However, there seems to be little disagreement on the idea that from these different religious traditions the Javanese created something unique: Javanese Islam.

This story about Javanese Islam has demonstrable colonial roots -which we will uncover in the course of this dissertation- and this has of course not escaped post-colonial critique. In order to counter the inherent essentialism in a concept such as 'Javanese Islam', it has become standard practice to point out that Javanese Islam is not an undifferentiated and monolithic entity. Minimally, a basic distinction is made between two varieties of Javanese Islam: commonly referred to as the *abangan* and the *santri* variant (e.g. Hefner 1985: 3-4 fn. 1). Both terms, *abangan* and *santri*, are surrounded with controversy and discussion. It has been argued that these terms do not have real reference in contemporary Java, or that the social groups they used to depict are now referred to with other terms (e.g. Woodward 1989; Lukens-Bull 2005: 12-14). However, although the distinction between these two variants has been called into question, nuanced, and relabelled numerous times it is still helpful to sketch the original dichotomy, for it brings to light the issues at stake.

### 1.1.1. Abangan

The typical description of the *abangan* can be captured in four characteristics. Firstly, the adherents of the *abangan* variety of Javanese Islam are described as people who follow only some of the precepts of Islam. The *abangan* will be circumcised, will perhaps respect the *ramadan*, and will at least once in his life have proclaimed the Islamic confession of faith (*Shahada*). He will however have little to no knowledge of the *Qur'an*. He will not pray five times a day and it will be very unlikely that he even attends Friday prayer. This has led some scholars to conclude that the *abangan* is a nominal Muslim. A second characteristic is that the *abangan* are considered to be more concerned with the ritualistic side of their religion than with its doctrines. Their religious life is centred around the ritual of *slametan*, a communal meal held for the benefit of attaining *slamet* (harmony). Whether or not the *slametan* is an Islamic ritual, is a topic of debate. We will return to the subject of *slametan* and the issues related to it in the following chapters. Thirdly -related to the *slametan's* alleged non-Islamic origin- the *abangan* adheres to numerous religious practices that are arguably non-Islamic. Such practices include paying respect to and making offerings at the grave of a saintly person, at the shrine of the village guardian spirit, or at the grave of an ancestor, placing *sesajen* (small offerings) in order to placate spirits, and so on. Again whether or not such practices are to be considered Islamic is open to debate. Still, typically, the *abangan* is said to adhere to religious practices from different descent, making him/her syncretist. Fourthly, the *abangan* are described as being very tolerant to the level that they are indifferent to religious differences.

### 1.1.2. Santri

The *santri*, the other half of the dichotomy, is, contrary to the *abangan*, commonly described as a devout, orthodox Muslim who piously respects the five pillars of Islam. There is nothing nominal about her/his Islam. Secondly, the *santri* typically has good knowledge of the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* and is usually characterised as legalistic. The *santri's* religious practices are thus well founded in doctrine -as opposed to 'empty' ritualism. Thirdly, the *santri* steers clear from the above mentioned non-Islamic

practices which she/he would consider superstitious, old-fashioned and in conflict with the teachings of Islam. There is thus nothing syncretist about his/her Islam. Fourthly, then, although it would be incorrect to call the *santri* intolerant -although some groups of them would be- they are certainly not indifferent to religious differences. Consider, for example, the possibility for a *santri* to marry a non-Muslim. The chance of this happening would be quite a lot lower than an *abangan* marrying a non-Muslim.

### 1.1.3. Spectrum

Many scholars have argued that this bifurcation does not adequately portray the variety inherent to Javanese Islam. This has been remedied by positing not just two, but many different kinds of Javanese Islam. After all, this argument goes, Javanese Islam is a local expression of Islam. That is to say, the core texts, ideas and symbols of Islam are understood differently depending on the context or locality in which they are interpreted. Given the great cultural variety of Java, it is hence not surprising to find a plethora of 'Islams' in Java, all of which belong to the more general category of Javanese Islam (e.g. Daniels 2009). These different local expressions can be plotted out between the two poles of *abangan* and *santri*.

Thus, the discourse on Javanese Islam displays a variety of approaches. Still, there is one constant element: all of these approaches invariably describe Javanese Islam as combining two elements. On the one hand, there is Islamic faith and piety and on the other we find local, non-Islamic, traditional religious beliefs and practices. This stands to reason, for it would make no sense to talk about Javanese Islam and not recognise both an Islamic and Javanese element in it. Trivial though this remark may seem, it is important to stress the obvious here. After all, in my discussion of the discourse of Javanese Islam I am not presenting my own definition of 'Javanese Islam' -a definition that some may find essentialist- but merely the way 'Javanese Islam' has been understood and defined over a long stretch of time, and from many different viewpoints. Therefore, I am not describing the essence of Javanese Islam, an essence

that is static and unchanging. I am simply pointing out the common element in all the different approaches out there. This is a point on which these different approaches have no argument. Their dispute centres on other issues. What is the *manner* in which these elements have been combined: is it a matter of assimilation or of syncretism? What exactly does this combination amount to: a truly Islamic religion, a religion that is actually Javanese, or something hybrid? What is the name of this religion: Islam, Islam *kejawen*, Islam *abangan*,...? These are and have been the issues at stake. There is no discussion, though, regarding that what makes Javanese Islam so Javanese, viz. this combination, this bringing together of religious beliefs and practices from different descent. However, as we will see this combination is far from unproblematic.

## 1.2. An inconsistency

The quotes above indicate that, despite the great variety in which different scholars delineate their subject matter, the crux of their definition of Javanese Islam minimally contains the combination of two elements: an element of Islamic belief and practice, and an element of local traditions and beliefs. The origins of these local traditions and beliefs are usually traced back to Hinduism, Buddhism, ancestor worship and animism. That is to say, they stem from Java's pre-Islamic period. However, between the Islamic faith and piety on the one hand and the pre-Islamic beliefs and practices on the other there is a tension.

This tension presents itself, for example, in a subtle way in Robert Wessing's discussion of how in East-Java calamities are addressed with the help of a *dukun* (a shaman, traditional healer, medium):

“Like elsewhere in Indonesia (...) belief in sorcery is deeply ingrained in East Java, *adherence to Islam notwithstanding*.” (Wessing 2010: 60; italics mine)

In the context of Wessing's article this sorcery is to be understood as a body of pre-Islamic ritual practices that mostly stem from animism or ancestor worship. The tension between these and the Islamic beliefs and practices is expressed by the term “notwithstanding”. Wessing's observation then amounts to the following: even though the people in East Java

are Muslim and thus should not occupy themselves with animism and ancestor worship, they still do. Paul Stange voices the same tension as follows:

“The visible persistence of animistic and Hindu beliefs has often seemed to mean that the Javanese are *not fundamentally Muslim*, that only the purists deserve the label.” (Paul Stange 1990: 252; italics mine)

Indeed, one of the issues in the discourse on Javanese Islam is that the adherence of Javanese Muslims to pre-Islamic beliefs and practices is often taken to undermine their status as true Muslims. In such cases, the tension implicit in the common conceptualisation of Javanese Islam becomes more apparent. Fauzan Saleh addresses this issue when he discusses the distinction between *santri* and *abangan*:

“... to be Javanese does not always necessarily mean to be a Muslim but more likely to be an *abangan* Muslim. For the Javanese, strict adherence to orthodox Islam, which means being a *santri*, might cause somebody to be dislodged from his social and cultural environment. *Being abangan, therefore also means being lukewarm Muslims* and having only a slight concern with religious allegiance.” (Saleh 2001: 37-38; italics mine)

In some cases this tension is even expressed in terms of heresy, as Woodward points out in his eulogy of Mbah Maridjan:

“There are many, including some in Yogyakarta, who regard *his [Mbah Maridjan's] interpretation of Islam as heretical*. But there are hundreds of millions of Muslims for whom Islam is as much a local as it is a universal faith and for whom devotion to God and concern with local modes of spiritual and religious practice are inextricably linked.” (Woodward 2010; italics mine)

The above examples -to which we could add numerous others- illustrate the apparent tension in the concept of Javanese Islam, a tension that can be formulated as an inconsistency. In what follows, I will focus on the conception of Javanese Islam as a syncretist religion, i.e. as a syncretist mix of Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs and practices. The reason I pick this particular conceptualisation of Javanese Islam is twofold. Firstly, of all the approaches to Javanese Islam, the one that treats it as a syncretist religion has by far the longest pedigree. Secondly, the idea that Javanese

Islam as a syncretist religion has regained popularity with M.C. Ricklefs' coinage of the term "mystic synthesis" which -as will be discussed later on- basically expresses the same idea as syncretist Javanese Islam (Ricklefs 2006). It therefore stands to reason to start with this approach and only then cover the others.

### **A logical inconsistency**

By inconsistency I mean that within one and the same argument one holds for true two or more propositions that are mutually exclusive. A typical example of such a logical inconsistency is:

- A. The moon is entirely made out of cheese
- B. The moon is partly made out of cheese

One is being logically inconsistent if one claims that both proposition A and proposition B are true at the same time. Another such example is the following:

- A. Lincoln is taller than Jones
- B. Jones is taller than Shorty
- C. Shorty is taller than Lincoln

From A and B it follows that Lincoln is taller than Shorty. Therefore, one is being logically inconsistent if one claims propositions A, B, and C are all true at the same time.

I will argue below that speaking about Javanese Islam as a syncretist mix of Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs and practices leads one into a logical inconsistency. Such a concept then is suspect, to say the least. In fact, it is an indication of deeper theoretical issues.

The tension, inherent in the common definition of Javanese Islam, can be formulated as an inconsistency in 6 steps:

A = Javanese Islam is a kind of Islam.



This proposition really shouldn't need any clarification. The term Javanese Islam itself implies that we are dealing with a kind of Islam and not a kind of Christianity, or Hinduism, etc.

One essential step in becoming a Muslim is pronouncing the *Shahada* or the declaration of the belief in the oneness of God and the acceptance of Muhammed as God's prophet: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God" (Gimaret 2014). However, one does not just pronounce the *Shahada*, but one does so under certain conditions. One of these is that one pronounce it with knowledge of the meaning of the *Shahada*. In other words, when pronouncing the *Shahada*, one confirms the oneness of Allah, i.e. the principle of *tawhid* or monotheism (ibid.). A violation of this principle of *tawhid*, by according divinity to another entity than Allah, constitutes a sin, i.e. *shirk*. Without this belief or doctrine, Islam would simply not be possible. Therefore, without *tawhid*, Javanese Islam cannot be Islam.

B = Islam does not allow practices and beliefs that are in violation of Islamic teachings.

It is not difficult to accept this proposition. After all, what makes Islam Islam and not another kind of religion are its doctrines or beliefs. By proclaiming to be a Muslim, one is expected to follow the teachings of Islam. *Shirk*, i.e. the violation of the principle of *tawhid* by practicing idolatry or polytheism, constitutes an unforgivable crime. That is, all sins may be forgiven by Allah, except for the one of *shirk*, unless one has repented before death. There exist different kinds of *shirk* (either open or concealed) and of these different types, worshipping others than Allah with the expectation of a reward from those others, is an obvious form of *shirk* (ibid.).

C = Javanese Islam does not allow practices and beliefs that are incompatible with or in violation of Islamic teachings. (follows from A & B)

Since Javanese Islam is a kind of Islam, it follows that it too cannot but condemn beliefs and practices that run against at least certain of its central precepts. In other words, since Javanese Islam holds to the doctrine of *tawhid*, without which it could not be Islam, it too knows of the sin of *shirk*.

D = Javanese Islam is the combination of Islamic teachings with practices and beliefs from pre-Islamic religions, some of which are incompatible with or in violation of Islamic teachings.

This is the widely accepted definition of (syncretist) Javanese Islam. Practices such as burning incense on the grave of an ancestor, or making offerings at the shrine of a village guardian spirit, or performing a *Labuhan* as did Mbah Maridjan, are directed to other beings than Allah. Moreover, all are performed with the expectation of a reward from these entities. Hence, they are *strictu sensu* not compatible with the doctrine of monotheism and are by many considered to be *shirk*.

E = Javanese Islam allows practices and beliefs that are incompatible with or in violation of Islamic teachings. (follows from D)

C and E cannot be true at the same time.

However, both follow from the common conceptualisation of syncretist Javanese Islam. Therefore this concept leads us into logical inconsistency.

What is the relevance of this inconsistency? The first thing to stress is that it is located at a theoretical level. That is to say, this logical inconsistency says something about the scholarly efforts to understand certain Javanese practices and/or beliefs by referring to these as syncretist Javanese Islam. It is important to emphasise this, because I am not making any statements about Javanese Islam, syncretist or not, or any other phenomenon in Javanese cultural or social reality. I am merely drawing attention to a logical fallacy at the heart of one particular way in which certain aspects of this reality have been and are being depicted, and thus made sense of.

One might want to deny the presence of this logical fallacy by arguing that my formulation of the inconsistency is itself fallacious. One might argue that this formulation contains an assumption about what true Islam is or is not, i.e. that it contains a yardstick by which to measure the 'Islamness' of syncretist Javanese Islam. Is this the case? The most probable candidate for such a yardstick would be the adherence to principle of *tawhid*. In other words, one might feel compelled to argue that I am demanding from Javanese Muslims a behaviour in strict accordance to this principle under penalty of logical inconsistency. However, it should be obvious that this is not what I am arguing. Firstly, as discussed above, I am not making any statements about Javanese Islam, or Islam in general. Secondly, I merely point out that according to Islam pronouncing the *Shahada* with conviction, i.e. with understanding of what the *Shahada* entails, is the only requirement for becoming a Muslim. It is the minimal requirement each Muslim has met, at least at one point in his/her life, regardless of how orthodox and pious, nominal or lax he/she is. Therefore, even if I were invoking some kind of assumption as to how to measure the Islamness of the Javanese -which I am not- it is an Islamic yardstick and not mine. There is thus no hidden assumption that invalidates my formulation of the logical inconsistency.

However, even if the formulation of the logical inconsistency is valid, one might still want to question its relevance. After all, one might argue, is not reality itself often inconsistent? Is not every culture complex, does not every culture contain many different strands, some of which are at odds with each other? Why then, so this argument might run, would I demand logical consistency from Javanese culture? The reply to such an argument would be twofold. Firstly, it needs to be repeated that the said logical inconsistency is to be located at the level of theory. Whether or not there is something logically inconsistent about the behaviour of Javanese Muslims is thus not really the issue. What is, is that our understanding of it, the theory on syncretist Javanese Islam if you will, should be able to explain it satisfactorily. Even if we were to consider Javanese culture to be essentially inconsistent, then our explanation of that inconsistency would need to be logically consistent. The formulation above has shown that the representation of the Javanese religious condition, whether it is in reality inconsistent or not, in terms of a syncretist Javanese Islam in itself leads into inconsistency. Consequently, in terms of

an explanation of Javanese cultural and social reality, it cannot be productive.

The second reply to the suggestion that the Javanese might actually be inconsistent, hence denying the relevance of the formulated logical inconsistency, entails a brief examination of the possible consequences of 'allowing' Javanese Muslims to be inconsistent. What are the implications of taking this suggestion at face value? For example, how could we explain that a hypothetical Javanese Muslim proclaims to believe in and worship only one god, but then proceeds to make offerings to deities, spirits and ancestors? Such actions can be reckoned inconsistent. How could we possibly explain this? On the one hand, we could argue that this Javanese Muslim does not understand what it means for there to be only Allah and that worshipping other gods or entities than Allah goes against the first and foremost doctrine of Islam. It is quite possible that this hypothetical Javanese Muslim is not smart enough, not rational enough, to understand this. Thereby, we could say that a first explanation for this particular hypothetical Javanese Muslim to be inconsistent is a lack of intelligence. On the other hand, we could grant this hypothetical Javanese Muslim logical capacities. That is, he fully understands what is intended by pronouncing the *Shahada*, but still he consciously worships other entities. Such behaviour would imply that he either does not take the *Shahada* seriously, or does not honestly worship these other entities. In both instances he exhibits a lack of sincerity. In other words, a second possible explanation for the inconsistent behaviour of this particular hypothetical Javanese Muslim would be inauthenticity.

These, I would suggest, are the two implications of the suggestion that the Javanese Muslims actually exhibit inconsistent religious behaviour and hold inconsistent beliefs. Again I need to stress that I am speaking here in terms of explanation and not of Javanese cultural and social reality. The reason is obvious. One might grant that there are individual Javanese Muslims who are insincere about their religious beliefs or who do not understand what it means to pledge adherence to only one god. It is another thing to claim that this is the case for the entire population of Javanese Muslims. We need to keep in mind that we are talking about a very large and diversified group in Javanese society, consisting of both

poor and rich, well and less educated, low and high status<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, it would be hard to maintain that this entire group fails to understand the relevance of *tawhid* and thus unknowingly commits *shirk*. Similarly, it is hard to maintain that the entire population of Javanese Muslims would be inauthentic. One might argue that because of social pressure or out of political prudence the Javanese have had to resort to Islam, without being truly converted. There is however little in Javanese history to support such a claim. The transition from Hindu Majapahit to Muslim Mataram and the concomitant conversion of the Javanese population is considered to have been remarkably smooth. It has been often argued that the Javanese were not converted by the sword, which makes it all the more unlikely that prudence played a role in their religious preferences. Neither do more recent events give foundation to the claim of inauthenticity. The eradication of ‘atheist communists’ by the army and *santri* Muslims during Suharto’s rise to power and the subsequent prohibition of atheism, entailed an obligation for each Indonesian to be affiliated to one of the state sanctioned religions, animism and ancestor worship not being recognised (e.g. Picard 2011: 14-15). However, this too would not support the claim that Javanese Muslims are inauthentic, as the descriptions of syncretist Javanese Islam predate the Suharto New Order regime with about a century. Consequently, because of the unlikelihood of these implications, the suggestion that the syncretist Javanese Muslim as a demographic is indeed logically inconsistent would seem improbable.

Lastly, I am hardly the first to draw attention to the problems inherent to the representation of the Javanese religious condition in terms of syncretism. As we shall see in the following chapters such a representation and especially its connotation of being less than truly Muslim has indeed been criticised for being borderline, if not flat-out, racist. Given the implied risk of (inadvertently) dubbing the Javanese Muslims inauthentic or irrational, such criticism is not entirely unwarranted.

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<sup>2</sup> According to Robert W. Hefner *abangan* Islam (i.e. syncretist Javanese Islam) would have embraced two thirds of the Javanese population in the mid-twentieth century. However, it is not clear what the source of this estimation is (Hefner 2011: 71). Ricklefs’ discussion of the mystic synthesis (2012: 81-86) underscores the contention that *abangan* population would have been very large at this point in history. Ricklefs also treats the difficulties involved in estimating the number of *santri* versus *abangan* (ibid.: 81-86; 268-73).

Given the above considerations I would propose that the formulated logical inconsistency does indeed point out a flaw in the scholarly understanding of Javanese Islam. Is this deficient understanding of Javanese Islam perhaps located at the level of the concept 'Javanese Islam'? And would it then help us to devise a different, 'consistent' definition of Javanese Islam in order to solve the epistemological problems delineated above? In a sense, this is what happens by (re-)defining Javanese Islam as a local form of Islam. However, as we will see in the course of this dissertation, this conceptualisation comes with its own set of theoretical problems. In other words, the problem of the sketched logical inconsistency is not to be located on the level of definition, but rather on the level of theory. After all, the function of a definition is merely to stipulate how we use a certain concept within a particular theory. In our case, the definition of Javanese Islam as a syncretist religion merely tells us how we use the concept 'Javanese Islam' within the theory used to explain the Javanese religious condition (cf. Balagangadhara 2012: 13-33). Consequently, when pointing out that the use of the concept of Javanese Islam leads us into inconsistency, I am not targeting the definition or concept of 'Javanese Islam', but rather our current understanding of the phenomenon it refers to. This understanding, the 'textbook story' as I have been calling it, is theory-laden, whether we want to admit it or not. This is especially the case when we are dealing with accounts of Javanese Islam that aspire to be scientific<sup>3</sup>. Consequently, I would suggest that in order to resolve the logical inconsistency we should not tamper with the definition of Javanese Islam, but rather look at our understanding of it.

Another way to formulate the same point is as follows: consider a group of people sharing a specific cultural background, say a Western cultural

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<sup>3</sup> With scientific I mean first and foremost an attitude, i.e. the "spirit of scientific enquiry - the spirit of ruthlessly questioning every belief" (Balagangadhara 1994: 44). A scientific account should start with as few assumptions as possible. Scientific accounts, both from social sciences or natural sciences, are hypothetical, tentative, and speculative, but are also open to scrutiny and empirical testing. A scientific story can be judged according to different standards, such as explanatory power (how much can hypothesis explain without the need for auxiliary hypotheses? is the hypothesis *ad hoc* or not?), cognitive productivity (can one raise new and interesting questions?), empirical testability (i.e. being able to spell out what facts confirm or contradict the story/explanation). A good indication of the scientificity of an explanation is to see how good it fares (by the mentioned standards) in comparison to other scientific stories dealing with the same problems.

background, who observe a certain inconsistency in the religious behaviours and beliefs of people from another culture, in this case the Javanese culture. In an attempt to render this situation intelligible they dub this behaviour and these beliefs syncretist. However, since syncretism means reconciling beliefs that are in fact contradictory, the explanation amounts to little more than labelling said behaviour and beliefs. In other words, if the Javanese Muslims are indeed inconsistent in their religious behaviour and beliefs -a claim I have not made- then calling this syncretist does not help us to understand it.

### 1.3. Attempted remedies for a logical inconsistency

As mentioned, the above inconsistency has not escaped the scholars of Javanese Studies. Broadly speaking, we can discern two main manoeuvres for solving it. Somewhat oversimplifying, we could say that first manoeuvre entails denying the Islamic nature of Javanese religion, while the second downplays the Javanese elements of it.

#### 1.3.1. Javanism

I use the term 'Javanism' here as a label for the argument that the so-called Javanese Muslims aren't actually Muslim, but adhere to an indigenous Javanese religion, viz. Javanism. According to this stance, even though the Javanese Muslims have pronounced the *Shabada*, are circumcised and abstain from pork, they are not really Muslim. After all, as this argument has it, they do not perform the five daily prayers, do not attend Friday prayer and neglect the *Ramadan*. On the contrary, the Javanese are said to engage in practices that are recognisably un-Islamic. Typical examples include offerings for *Dewi Sri* (the Javanese, pre-Islamic, pre-Hindu goddess of fertility) the reverence of saints and the worship of ancestors, but also the practice of *petungan* (Javanese numerology) and the popularity of *wayang kulit* (Javanese shadow play) with its Indic stories such as the Ramayana. Anybody even slightly familiar with the literature on Java knows the phrase that in Java Islam is but a thin veneer covering a pre-Islamic mindset. This way of looking at the Javanese religious condition can be traced back to the middle of the 19th century. A case in

point is the way Jan F. G. Brumund -whom we shall come across again later on- describes Javanese hermits and their sanctuaries:

"In these people the sanctuary of before [i.e. the Hindu sanctuary and practices] continued to live on, covered with a veneer of Mohammedanism, as still today, like we already said, in those places of prayer and offerings there."<sup>4</sup> (Brumund 1868: 73)

Brumund has it that Java's indigenous religion originally sprang from a Polynesian religion and during the course of history came to include and rehash other religions such as Hinduism and Islam. The original Polynesian religion consisted of worship of nature (animism) and ancestor worship. All of these elements are still present and active in Javanism (ibid.: 251-52)<sup>5</sup>. Another scholar of Java, Petrus J. Zoetmulder, explains the true religion and character of the Javanese in a similar vein:

"It seems we can say for the period of Indianization more or less the same as for the period of Islamization: Java and the Javanese underwent a tremendous impact of foreign ideas, of culture, of religious concepts, etc., but they were not swept away by them. They moulded them in their own way. This might be called Hindu-Javanism, as much as what is now found may be called Islamic-Javanism. In both cases the stress must lie on Javanism and there are very important elements in it that remained essentially the same." (Zoetmulder 1967: 16)

By positing that the Javanese accommodated both Hinduism and Islam and made it their own in a Javanese way, it is argued that the religion of the Javanese is thus essentially Javanese -and not Islamic. However, upon closer scrutiny, this kind of argument does not solve our inconsistency. From the moment of its 'discovery', Javanism has been defined as a syncretist mix of practices and beliefs from Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, ancestor worship and animism -that means, in exactly the same terms as syncretist Javanese Islam. Furthermore, it is defined in contradistinction

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<sup>4</sup> My translation of: "In die menschen leefde het heiligdom van vroeger, met een vernis van mohamedanisme overtrokken, steeds voort; gelijk ook nog heden, zoo als we reeds zeiden, in die bidplaatsen en de offeranden daar."

<sup>5</sup> As we shall see in chapter 4, I present Brumund as the first person to consistently speak of "Javanese Muslims" and thus implicitly of 'Javanese Islam' (1854). By 1868 he had apparently adopted "Javanism".



from Islam, in the exact same way as Javanese Islam had been set apart from true, pure, pious, or legalist Islam. Lastly, its adherents are characterised, just like the *abangan*, as ritualistic, tolerant, and syncretist. In other words, two supposedly different phenomena -Javanese Islam is not Javanism, after all- are identified in exactly the same terms. Consequently, this 'relabelling' does not remove our inconsistency. After all, the Javanese in question would refer to themselves as Muslims and not as 'Javanists'. And, inevitably, in order to logically explain this inconsistency, the 'Javanists' must be either intellectually inferior or hypocrites. As discussed above, it is impossible to endorse such a cynical view.

What this manoeuvre then actually reveals is something more fundamental: the study of Javanese religion exhibits an inherent lack of theoretical clarity. Consider for a moment the other names floating about that distinguish the same set of phenomena. Besides Javanese Islam and Javanism, there is *abangan* religion (Geertz 1964 [1960]: 154), *agami jawi* (Koentjaraningrat 1989 [1985]), Islam *kejawan* (Woodward 1989), mystic synthesis (Ricklefs 2006), *abanganism* (Hefner 2011). If this religion is so prevalent in Java and has been established as long as the scholarly accounts have it, then why is there not one single name for it? Take for instance Merle Ricklefs' claim that by ca. 1800 the whole of Java was converted to a syncretist Javanese Islam (Ricklefs 2006). Although he chooses to call this religion the "mystic synthesis", it is obvious that he is talking about Javanese Islam as a syncretist religion, as his constant use of the term 'reconciliation' makes clear. Furthermore, he treats this "mystic synthesis" as distinct from orthodox, reformist Islam. So, if, as Ricklefs has it, virtually all of Java was by that time converted to Javanese Islam and this religion was constituent to the Javanese identity, then why is it not known what the name of this religion is?

Moreover, why is there so much dispute on the nature of this religion? Some think of this religion as essentially syncretist (e.g. Geertz 1964 [1960]; Ricklefs 2006). Others deny this syncretist nature and claim that Javanese Islam is true Islam in a Javanese expression (Woodward 1989, 2011; Florida 1997). Still others take a position somewhere in the middle and prefer the idea of a multitude of Javanese expressions of Islam with room for syncretism (Daniels 2009). Why are scholars unable to determine whether it is Islamic, Hindu-Buddhist, or Javanist? Why is it not clear what its doctrinal core is? A simple comparison with e.g. Luther-

anism shows how strange this actually is. We know what the name of Lutheranism is -after all Lutherans call themselves Lutherans. We know what the nature of Lutheranism is: it is a branch within Christianity. And we know along which doctrines we can plot the different Lutheran denominations. In the case of Javanese religion such clarity is completely lacking and I would argue that this is an indication of the theoretical issues at stake.

### 1.3.2. Assimilation

In the wake of post-colonialism it has become common practice to denounce the orientalist insights of authors such as the mentioned Bru-mund and Zoetmulder. The characterisation of Javanese Islam in terms of syncretism carried with it the implication that this religion is not pure Islam and thus that the Javanese are not truly Muslim. As pointed out above such a representation is open to charges of racism. The second manoeuvre to fix the conceptual inconsistency rejects this syncretist Javanese Islam as an orientalist misrepresentation. Instead it argues that Javanese Islam is simply Islam that has assimilated Javanese cultural elements and remnants from the pre-Islamic religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, animism and ancestor worship. The presence of pre-Islamic elements in Javanese Islam is thus recognised. However, having been Islamised they have come to express Islamic beliefs instead of the original Hindu, Buddhist and other beliefs. Javanese Islam then becomes a “local Islam” (Woodward 1989: 69 ff.) or a “native Islam” (Florida 1997).

A typical example is the veneration of ancestors and saints. By making offerings and/or reciting prayers at the grave of a saint or ancestor one tries to either avert a certain mishap or obtain a certain desired good or state. As mentioned, this is often described as an instance of ancestor worship, and therefore in conflict with the Islamic principle of *tawhid*. However, according to the assimilation argument, such veneration has been brought into accord with the teachings of Islam. The venerated saint or ancestor has become a mere focal point for the praise and worship that is ultimately directed to none other than Allah. It is by the hand of Islamic scholars, well versed in Islamic scriptures, that these practices have thus been brought in line with the teachings of Islam.

At face value, this argument seems to carry quite some weight. After all, it is more than obvious that there is Islam in Java and undeniably it has assimilated Javanese elements. However, pointing this out does not really solve the issues involved in the conceptualisation of Javanese Islam as a syncretist religion. We will return to the assimilation argument more thoroughly in chapter 6. For now, it suffices to point out that while we are no longer confronted with the problem of a logical inconsistency, another problem has taken its place: that of heresy. We should not lose sight of the fact that what for one Muslim is merely an instance of acceptable assimilation is an instance of *shirk* for another -regardless of being Javanese or not. For example, while one Muslim from Java might consider the veneration of saints a perfectly Islamic practice, another Muslim from Java will denounce it as an innovation or corruption (*bid'ah* and *khurafat*) of correct practice and belief. This then is one point where the assimilation argument falls short: in the end the matter of the true nature of Javanese Islam is a theological issue. How then do we, as scientists, know which of the Islamic scripturalists is right: those who condone or those who condemn?

### 1.3.3. Summary

In the above paragraphs I have argued the following. The 'Javanist argument', while denying the Islamic character of Javanese religion, replicates the problem of inconsistency inherent to the conception of syncretist Javanese Islam. The assimilation argument, while downplaying the Javanese character of Javanese Islam, replaces the problem of inconsistency with the problem of heresy. Therefore, neither of these strategies offers a satisfactory solution and should rather be seen as indicative of the theoretical problems surrounding the concept of Javanese Islam.

### 1.4. *Abangan* religion, mystic synthesis, and non-Western religions

Not many books have had as great an influence on the study of religion in Java as Clifford Geertz' 1960 *The religion of Java*. It is the result of sev-

eral years of fieldwork by a team from Cornell University in a small town, dubbed Modjokuto<sup>6</sup>, in East Java.

#### 1.4.1. *Abangan* religion

Geertz divides Javanese religion into three variants: the *abangan*, the *santri*, and the *priyayi* variant. The first variant is the religion of the *abangan* (the red ones, a synonym for syncretist or nominal Muslims), which Geertz describes as "... a balanced integration of animistic, Hinduistic, and Islamic elements, a basic Javanese syncretism which is the Island's true folk religion" (Geertz 1964 [1960]: 5). The third type, the religion of the *priyayi* (nobility) is actually the genteel version of *abangan* religion. In other words, it is actually the same syncretist religion, but more refined and more oriented towards the fine arts and mysticism, which Geertz identifies as Hindu-Buddhist. Since, culturally speaking, the *abangan* relate to the *priyayi* like the peasantry to the gentry, so do their religious practices (ibid.: 234-35). The *abangan* stress the animistic aspects of the overall Javanese syncretism and the *priyayi* stress the, apparently more refined, Hindu-Buddhist aspects (ibid.: 6). While Geertz sees *priyayi* and *abangan* religion as related or, perhaps more accurately, as different instances of the same religion, the *santri* variant clearly stands apart from these two. According to Geertz, the *santri* religion has come to signify, especially in the 20th century, the Islam of that group of Javanese who strive for Islamic orthodoxy and who distance themselves from the more syncretist Muslims -which Geertz seems to equate with the *abangan* (ibid.: 123, 126-30).

#### 1.4.2. The mystic synthesis

Many scholars have taken it on themselves to criticise Geertz' tripartite and even more scholars have taken his study of Javanese religion, or their critique of it, as the point of departure for their own research and analysis of the Javanese religious condition. A case in point is Ricklefs' imposing trilogy of the Islamisation of Java (Ricklefs 2006, 2007, 2012),

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<sup>6</sup> Modjokuto literally means Middletown and is actually a pseudonym for the town Pare.

in which he describes, amongst many other things, the rise and decline of Javanese Islam, or in his words the “mystic synthesis”. One major inspiration for his research was Geertz’s description of the *abangan* as a social category with seemingly deep roots in Java’s ancient past (Ricklefs 2007: 85). However, Ricklefs own historical research shows that there is no mention of a social category in Javanese society by the name of *abangan* before the mid-nineteenth century. Therefore the trichotomy, or rather dichotomy of *abangan/priyayi* versus *santri* was not at all as deep, profound and enduring as Geertz himself seemed to have portrayed it. Consequently, Ricklefs argues that before that time, at least from about 1800 onwards, Java must have been homogeneously Islamised. However, the Javanese had not simply converted to Islam, they had their own understanding of it. More particularly, the Javanese had converted to their own particular understanding of the mystical dimension of Islam, i.e. of Sufism (ibid.: 5). Ricklefs baptises this the “mystic synthesis”. The intensification or deepening of the Islamisation of Java during the 19th and 20th century put serious pressure on the mystical synthesis and gradually resulted in a bifurcation of the formerly homogenous Islamic Javanese society into a *putihan* (the white ones, i.e. *santri*) and *abangan* divide. Today, after more than a century and a half on the defensive, it seems that the *abangan* fraction, or rather the mystic synthesis, is very close to complete dissolution.

“There is now no significant opposition to the deeper Islamisation of Javanese society. There is only difference of opinion about what shape Islamic life should take...” (Ricklefs 2012: 446)

The above illustrates the impact of Geertz’ study of Javanese religion and also the level of criticism it has received. Ricklefs’ comments on Geertz actually amount to little more than a fine-tuning of his basic distinction of the *abangan/priyayi* religion versus the *santri* religion. In fact, Ricklefs’ own study corroborates Geertz’ findings by placing them in a historical and political perspective (ibid.: 80-115). When Ricklefs describes the Javanese mystic synthesis as a reconciliation of different *Weltanschauungen*, it is clear that he is talking about a reconciliation between indigenous worldviews and that of Islam (ibid.: 371). Such a reconciliation is nothing more or less than the syncretism or “balanced integration” Geertz referred to. The main difference then between Ricklefs and Geertz is the vast array of sources the first refers to, in order to tell his

own story about the mystic synthesis, *abangan* religion, or simply 'Javanese Islam'. It is worth the detour to consider in more detail how Ricklefs describes the mystic synthesis and its three main characteristics.

Firstly, the mystic synthesis is characterised by a strong commitment to Islamic Identity. Presumably, this means that the Javanese identify themselves as Muslim. Most of Ricklefs' evidence regarding the reconciliation of Javanese and Muslim worldviews is drawn from documents from Javanese royal courts. Therefore, we should probably understand this commitment as how in the first place Javanese rulers and nobility came to speak of themselves as Muslims and later, in the second place, the Javanese population at large came to consider themselves as Muslims too.

The second characteristic is a widespread observation of the five pillars of Islam. According to Ricklefs, the sources that tell us about religion on Java only indicate that the Javanese observed the five pillars of Islam. It is only by the second half of the 19th century that reports indicate that the Javanese do not observe these pillars. However, as Ricklefs makes perfectly clear, the sources on Javanese religion before that period sketch a "patchy" picture at best (Ricklefs 2007: 11). Therefore, in a non-trivial sense then, this 'fact' is actually based on an absence of sources. In the following chapters, I will argue that the few sources pre-dating the mid-nineteenth century paint a picture of the Javanese religious condition that is actually very much in line with that of the period thereafter. In other words, we actually have good reasons to assume that the observation of the five pillars of Islam was not at all that widespread.

The third characteristic is the acceptance of local spiritual forces. It goes without saying that, in the context of Ricklefs' argument, the Javanese belief in these local spiritual forces (and the practices that come with it) is at odds with Islam. In fact, Ricklefs sees the period from about c. 1300 until c. 1800 as a continuous struggle between these two competing worldviews. At several key moments in Java's history a fragile balance is struck. One such moment is the rule of Sultan Agung (r. 1613-1642), whom Ricklefs considers the quintessential reconciler of Javanese and Islamic identities in the Javanese royal traditions (Ricklefs 2006: 36). In the footsteps of the founder of the Muslim kingdom of Mataram, Senapati Ingalaga (r. c. 1584-1601), Sultan Agung adhered both to Islam and

to pre-Islamic traditions. Of these pre-Islamic traditions, the marriage of the reigning Sultan with the goddess of the Southern Ocean, Ratu Kidul, is arguably one of the most salient. It is a tradition that is honoured to this day. Despite this, Sultan Agung also took a turn towards Islam. He used it as a means to assert centralised control over the territories he had conquered: he wanted his rule to be accepted as “a political, cultural and religious axiom” (ibid.: 37). One of the measures to this end was his pilgrimage to Tembayat, i.e. the grave of Sunan Bayat the last king of the Hindu kingdom Majapahit. He, as the legends go, had been converted to Islam by Sunan Kalijaga, one of the *wali sanga* (the nine saints who are credited with spreading Islam over Java), and then became a *wali* himself. At Tembayat, Sultan Agung received a secret mystical science (*ngelmu*), allowing him to assert his rule. According to Ricklefs, Javanese culture was “attuned to ideas of occult power” and thus, Sultan Agung wanted “to harness to his purpose the supernatural powers of Islam” (ibid.: 39). By a Javanisation of Islam and an Islamisation of Java, the Islamic and pre-Islamic worldviews were reconciled:

“The Javanese synthesis represented in effect a trade-off between two quite different ways of looking at the phenomenal and eternal worlds. At the risk of oversimplification, Islam in Java (...) may be thought of as a characteristically Middle Eastern worldview that was introduced into an area of characteristically monsoon-Asian religiosity.” (ibid.: 222-23)

The theological and theoretical divide between these two different worldviews -the one is a revealed religion that posits a transcendent deity, the other posits an immanent divinity- was bridged by the “ecumenical genius of mysticism” as found in Sufism (ibid.: 223).

Although the above summary does not do justice to the wealth of data in Ricklefs’ work, nor to the nuances and reservations it makes, it does show that his rendition of the mystic synthesis is very much in line with what I have called the textbook story of Javanese Islam. After all, in both cases the religion of the Javanese is depicted as one that has reconciled, i.e. syncretised, worldviews, i.e. beliefs and practices, from Islamic and pre-Islamic descent. Moreover, the difficulties inherent to the textbook story emerge here as well. After all, it is not clear *how* Sufism managed to bring together these doctrines and practices that are actually mutually exclusive. Ricklefs is rather vague when it comes to the process of

“trade-off”, “negotiation”, of “Javanising Islam and Islamising Java”. Of course, he presents us with numerous illustrations of the mystic synthesis. Instances such as Sultan Agung and his descendant Pakubuwana IV, Susuhunan of Surakarta (r. 1788-1820) receiving the *ngelmu* of kingship at Tembayat are brought in to illustrate the mystic synthesis (ibid.: 182). Ricklefs argues that the dominant mode of religiosity in Java was the mystic synthesis exactly on the basis of such examples. However, in the end Ricklefs merely assumes that these are instances of the mystic synthesis. That is, he treats them as self-evident instances of the mystic synthesis, while in order to make his argument stick, he would have to prove that this is what these instances are. In other words, Ricklefs treats as proof for his argument that what needs to be proven. His argument is thus a perfect example of *petitio principii*. As we will see, this type of circular argumentation is rather common in the discussion regarding the nature of Javanese Islam.

#### 1.4.3. Non-Western religions

Another assumption, arguably more fundamental than the one above, is discussed in an interesting, though generally ignored, critique of Geertz<sup>7</sup>. In a 1967 article Werner Cohn argues that Geertz implicitly identifies the *abangan* religion as a religion along Western lines, while he initially set out describing it as distinct from Western religions<sup>8</sup>. Cohn distinguishes different kinds of categories in the anthropological literature on non-Western religions: an actors’ category and an observers’ category. The first category, which Cohn calls *nacirema*, consists of a large group of actions that “... are performed with a conspicuous sense of rightness or are avoided because of a similar conspicuous sense of wrongness” (Cohn 1967: 73)<sup>9</sup>. These actions also involve a large emotional investment.

<sup>7</sup> I thank Sarah Claerhout and Jakob De Roover for sharing this article with me.

<sup>8</sup> Werner Cohn is a German sociologist, currently Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of British Columbia. He has written extensively on gypsies.

<sup>9</sup> The term ‘nacirema’ was coined by Horace M. Miner, in his satirical article ‘Body Rituals among the Nacirema’ (1956). This paper pokes fun at the way anthropological studies describe other, i.e. non-Western, cultures. In it Miner describes certain rituals of a fictional tribe called the *Nacirema* (i.e. American spelled backwards).



However, this “large emotional investment” is generally not recognised by the actors, who do not set these practices apart from their ordinary actions. It is only the anthropologist that does so. Consequently, *nacirema* is an observers’ category. Examples include: social graces, healing practices, ritual segregation, toilet practices, etiquette, etc. The second category, which Cohn calls *sacred institutions*, consists of institutions that are set aside, by the actors, from their other activities. These institutions “... constitute a consciously delineated set of activities that the actors consider emotionally involving” (ibid.: 74). Of these sacred institutions some are religions: they involve ideas of the supernatural, ethical prescriptions, and ritual. Some are not, such as political movements, business enterprises, medical profession, organised sports, etc. but also Buddhist orders, Hindu and Buddhist Shrines and the *abangan* religion. Sacred institutions are thus an actors’ category.

Cohn’s critique of the anthropological descriptions of non-Western religions amounts to the following: while non-Western religions are identified and described along the lines of their *nacirema*, Western religions are identified and described along the lines of their *sacred institutions*. However, at some point or another in these anthropological accounts the two are implicitly considered merely different instances of the same category -instead of instances of two different categories all together. In other words, two different standards are used for defining religion in the West and outside the West, but ultimately they are thought of as instances of the same category. According to Cohn, Geertz commits this error in *The religion of Java*. For instance, Geertz speaks about secular feasts, implying that in the *abangan* religion there is a difference between secular and sacred institutions -i.e. the *abangan* religion is an instance of an actors’ category. However, Geertz initially delineated the *abangan* religion along the lines of *nacirema*, i.e. an observers’ category, where there is no distinction between these two spheres. (ibid.: 75; cf. Geertz 1964 [1960]: resp. 51, 62).

The most interesting part of Cohn’s critique is not so much the insistence on the correct and consistent use of definitions and categories. Neither is it the solution he proposes: restricting the use of the word “religion” to Christianity, Islam and Judaism. After all, how should we refer to phenomena such as Buddhism, Hinduism and *abangan* religion? As sacred institutions? Rather, it is his fundamental observation that a

phenomenon such as *abangan* religion, on the one hand, and religions such as Christianity and Islam on the other, belong to different categories, but nevertheless are sooner or later treated as instances of the same category. Moreover, Cohn also points out to whom *abangan* religion appears as a religion: it does so in the eyes of a Western anthropologist, and not in the eyes of the Javanese actors themselves. I propose to reformulate this observation as follows. The *abangan* religion, also known as the mystic synthesis or Javanese Islam, is described as symmetrical to religions such as Christianity and Islam, while the indications that these phenomena are in fact asymmetrical are being ignored. In the following chapters, my aim is to elaborate on this observation.

### 1.5. What is the origin of Javanese Islam?

In this chapter I have pointed out the centrality of the concept 'Javanese Islam' in the study of Java. Subsequently, I have argued that our understanding of Javanese Islam appears to be riddled with theoretical problems. Starting with the logical inconsistency the prevalent definition of syncretist Javanese Islam leads us into, I have discussed the various manoeuvres that aim to alleviate this problem. From inauthenticity and racism to heresy, each manoeuvre brings with it its own theoretical problems. The discussion regarding the nature (and name) of Javanese Islam goes back at least to Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje's 1884 *De Beteekenis van den Islâm voor zijne belijders in Oost-Indië* (The meaning of Islam for its confessors in East India). Although such a long-spun discussion might appear intellectually stimulating, I have argued that this inherent indecisiveness actually indicates fundamental theoretical problems. Summarising, the concept 'Javanese Islam' cannot but misrepresent the Javanese religious condition. Consequently, we are confronted with two questions. Firstly, why do scholars continue to talk about 'Javanese Islam'? Secondly, if 'Javanese Islam' is indeed a misrepresentation, where does it come from? By answering the second question, we will be able to start making sense of the first one.

Java, its population, its culture and religion have been the focus of description and research for more than 500 years. In the following chapters I will draw a genealogy of the concept 'Javanese Islam' from this history.

The genealogy shows not only that it was the West that has described the Javanese religious and cultural condition, but also that it did so in analogy to its own religion and culture. Therefore, we already have a partial answer to the first question. The concept of 'Javanese Islam' is still used today because it belongs to a tradition of research.



## 2. The origins of a discourse: the first descriptions of Javanese religion

In the following chapters I will present a genealogy of the concept 'Javanese Islam', which traces the development of the description of the religion of the Javanese. As we will see, our current understanding and the current scholarly discourse on the Javanese religious condition has a lineage that goes back as early as the beginning of the 16th century. This lineage consists of successive 'generations' of descriptions, each building upon the accomplishments of its predecessors. As will become clear very quickly the sources for these descriptions are almost exclusively Western. What do I mean with this statement?

Firstly, it means that there are very few descriptions of Javanese religion besides the Western ones. There are some historical Chinese and Arabic sources that mention religion in Java, but their number is very small and seem to have contributed nothing to the establishment of the Western discourse on religion in Java. Consider for example W.P. Groeneveldt's *Notes on the Malay Archipelago and Malacca compiled from Chinese sources*, which draws on and translates for the first time Chinese sources dating back to the 5th century. Besides the fact that there are very few mentions of the religion of the Javanese -this is after all a treatise on the geography of the Malay archipelago- Groeneveldt's *Notes...* was published as late as 1880. Therefore, these particular sources were only made available to the scholars of Java at a time when the concept 'Javanese Islam' had already been firmly established. There is little to no indication that non-Western sources contributed to the conceptualisation of the religion of the Javanese as 'Javanese Islam'. The level to which such description

would corroborate the Western descriptions deserves a study of its own but, unfortunately, falls out of the scope of this dissertation<sup>10</sup>.

Secondly, the above statement seems to imply that there are no Javanese descriptions of their religion. In the course of this dissertation I will argue that there is a great deal of truth to this implication. Again two clarifications. On the one hand, there are Javanese texts that arguably deal with matters of religion, spirituality, ethics and moral conduct. These texts, such as the *Serat Cabolek*, *Serat Centhini*, *Babad Kedhiri*, *Serat Wedathama*, etc. or various *primbon* (a collection of things worth knowing) and *suluk* (a song with mystical content), *et al.* are routinely brought in to testify to the either Islamic or non-Islamic nature of Javanese religion, or to show that Javanese Islam is or is not orthodox Islam, or that the mystic elements in Javanese religion are either Hindu or Sufi, etc. Often the same texts are used to argue for opposing viewpoints. A representative example is the *Serat Centhini* which is usually said to testify to the syncretist character of Javanese Islam (e.g. Geels 1997: 55; Ricklefs 2006: 196-97). However, some scholars see in it proof of Javanese Islam's orthodoxy (Soebardi 1971), or refer to the *Serat Centhini* as proof of the truly Islamic character of Javanese literature (Florida 1997: 199-200). In other words, these texts are always *interpreted* in order to prove some scholar's viewpoint on Javanese Islam -they do not get to speak for themselves. Moreover, such works of Javanese literature entered the scholarly discourse on Javanese religion only through the works of Western scholars and have thus become recuperated into that established discourse. Taking them as Javanese descriptions of Javanese religion is, therefore, all but a straightforward matter. We will return to this issue later on in this dissertation. On the other hand, there are of course Javanese scholars researching Javanese religion. The level to which they present a Javanese description has to remain an open question for the time being. However, historically speaking, only as late as the late 19th century did Javanese scholars enter into the discourse on Javanese culture that had already

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<sup>10</sup> Groeneveldt (1880) finds the first mention of Java in *An account of the Buddhist countries*, a travel account by a Buddhist monk at the beginning of the 5th century CE. The author, "priest" Fahien, visited Java in 414 CE. He mentions the presence of Hindus and Buddhists, the latter being the minority. Groeneveldt points out that this work was translated into French by Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat. It was published in 1836. I have yet to establish whether this book was used by scholars on Javanese religion and in particular prior to Groeneveldt's publication.

been set up by Western scholars (Tsuchiya 1990). That is to say, the works of these Javanese scholars belong to the same lineage of Western descriptions, rather than to a lineage of Javanese descriptions of Javanese religion (should such a lineage exist).

The objective of the genealogy is to find the origins of the prevalent understanding of Javanese religion. With this in mind I use two guiding questions. Firstly, what are the structuring concepts used to describe the religion of the Javanese? For our purpose, it does not suffice to establish when terms such as 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' came into being, or who used the term *abangan* for the first time. After all, I am not so much interested in the origins of 'Javanese Islam', but rather in the origins of our understanding of it. Therefore, I will focus on the concepts used to make sense of Javanese religion, i.e. on the structuring concepts in the various (historical) phases of the conceptualisation of Javanese religion. Secondly, what is the conceptual context in which the descriptions of religion in Java were generated? Terms such as 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' do not stand on their own. They belong to and make sense only within a larger theoretical framework. In the course of the following chapter I will identify this framework or conceptual context. With these two guiding questions in mind I will examine the way in which Javanese religion was described and thus became represented.

### 2.1. *De Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*: a colonial power in a pre-colonial period

This chapter covers sources on Java from roughly 1500 until 1800. This period starts more or less when the Portuguese found their way to Malacca and the Moluccan Islands and its ending roughly coincides with the implosion of the VOC (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or Dutch East India Company). The latter had been founded in 1602 as means of reducing the high risks of individual voyages to the East. What brought the Europeans to the islands of the Indonesian archipelago and thus to Java was of course the prospect of the huge profits to be made in the spice trade. Despite these economic motives, the VOC was more than just a trading company, it was also a hegemonic power. In the 17th century it had about 600,000 Asian subjects. Quite a lot, when compared to

a population of 2 million in the Dutch Republic. It also had an impressive military and maritime power (Van Goor 2004: 23-25). In the areas under its control, the VOC exercised the same public duties as the Dutch Republic did at home: landownership, bureaucracy, courts, taxes, schools, churches, monopoly on violence, etc. Already in the 18th century, the VOC cooperated with native elites in the same way as the Dutch East Indies government would do in the 19th and 20th centuries. There is, therefore, a lot of continuity between the VOC and the Dutch East Indies period.

Actually, the continuity runs back all the way to Portuguese rule. Of course, any operation of such magnitude depends to a great degree on the availability of correct, useful, detailed, and up-to-date information. Thus, both the Portuguese and the Dutch had a system in place to collect and disseminate knowledge relevant to their operations. In fact, when the Dutch took over (by force) the Portuguese establishments to build their own factories, they also took over Portuguese governmental institutions, tax systems, religious organisations, the same middlemen, and the information contained in the Portuguese archives in the East Indies (ibid.: 57-63). In the case of new settlements the need for descriptions of the customs, laws, rights and duties of their new subjects was even more acute. Consequently, the VOC also produced detailed descriptions of their territories and its inhabitants from scratch. Furthermore, in each VOC office the departing supervisor (*gezaghebber*) was obliged to compose a *memorie*: a document providing an overview of the territory with the aim of facilitating the settling-in of his successor (Van Goor 1993: 7).

It is important to stress that in many aspects the VOC behaved like a colonial power. Clearly, the knowledge it generated about its territories and its subjects directly served the purpose of political power and economic profit. However, the academic research of Java, its people, culture, language and religion did not benefit from this situation (e.g. Van Dijk 1993). Especially due to its policy of secrecy in order to protect its business interests, the information the VOC gathered could not circulate freely. Therefore, the only way information about Java could reach the European public, both scholarly and in general, was via travel literature. By this term I mean the accounts and reports of the personal experiences of individuals, many of them in the service of the VOC. Amongst



them we find letters, diary entries, journals or log books. This literary genre enjoyed great popularity and thus had great influence on the way Javanese religion was represented. As we will see neither the Javanese nor their religion was the focal point in these accounts. Rather, they convey either useful information for fellow travellers -such as sea routes, the lay of the land, the goods to be found, etc.- or the personal experiences of the author. Still, these sources provide some of the earliest testimonies to the religion of the Javanese. With the notable exception of the work of François Valentijn, there were in this period no scientific publications on Java, its people, culture, and religion. As a result, the knowledge of Java among Dutch academics until around 1800 was quite limited and depended completely on this European literature (Van Goor 2004: 101).

## 2.2. Confines of description - horizon of expectation

Before we turn our attention to a number of extracts from this travel literature, let's consider the 'confines of description'. This term indicates the limits to what could and could not be described by these authors, what would and what would not constitute a topic of interest or a feat worth mentioning for these early travellers to the East. One way to get an idea of what these confines of description would have looked like for an early 16th century European traveller to Southeast Asia is to consider what knowledge he already had about the region he was about to visit<sup>11</sup>. By no means was such a traveller a *tabula rasa*. On the contrary, he would have had some expectations when going there. By looking at the available sources to a person from the late Middle Ages we can get an idea of what such a traveller's expectations would have been.

As far as I have been able to trace, the sources available to early travellers to Southeast Asia and Java in particular would have been very limited. First of all, a principle source of information would have been the Bible. To a person from the late Middle Ages or early Renaissance the world

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<sup>11</sup> In discussing the horizon of expectation of travellers to India in the late Middle ages and early Renaissance Balagangadhara (1994: 69-75) suggests a thought experiment: What sources would a Medieval monk or scholar turn to in order to make a *status quaestionis* regarding India? And what would such a *status quaestionis* look like? The idea of the confines of description is the result of executing the same thought experiment with regard to Java.

was a Biblical world. This means that the Bible was thought to hold an actual, factual record of the history of the world and mankind. Therefore, this person would have held for true that the earth was created about 4000 BCE and that around 2000 BCE a great flood had swept all of mankind from the face of the earth. All except of course for Noah, whose descendants had then populated the earth. Consequently, Java too would have been inhabited by his offspring, or so this person would have thought. Since God had instilled religion in each man and each nation, the Javanese too would have religion. However, it was to be expected that his nation would have wandered off from the true path and would have been led astray into idolatry by the Devil and his false teachings. This then would constitute a first expectation of the early travellers: Java is inhabited by idolaters.

Secondly, what would such a traveller have known about Islam? First of all, he would have thought of it as one particular kind of idolatry or false teaching. Besides that, the crusades had brought to light to what extent Islam was a religious and territorial power and it was increasingly seen as an obstacle to Christianity. During the Middle Ages, knowledge of Islam would for a large part have been derived from well-known stories such as the legend of Richard the Lionheart, the legend of Prester John (a Christian king somewhere in the Indies who would join forces with Europe to defeat the Muslims), or the epic song *Chanson de Roland*, that depicts the Saracens, i.e. the stereotypical Muslim for Medieval Europe as "... pagan (...) they worship idols -in this case Apollyon, Tervagant, and Mahomet..." (Moran Cruz 1999: 57). More 'scholarly' accounts depict the Muslims as heretics and fools, and Mohammed as a pseudo-prophet. While some accounts paint a more accurate picture of Islam than others, they all seem to share the objective of discrediting Islam and in particular Mohammed (ibid.: 65-66). This stance makes sense, because from the vantage point of Christianity Mohammed cannot but be a false prophet and thus a heretic. After all, according to Christianity, Jesus was God's renewal of His covenant with mankind. Jesus, being the Messiah, therefore had already fulfilled the Old Testament prophesies. In other words, the divine revelation was already complete. Consequently, Mohammed's revelation would have to be considered a false one, inspired by the Devil.

Thirdly, such a traveller might have had access to the works of ancient historians and geographers. With regard to Java in particular, Ptolemy

seems to have been the only ancient writer to have mentioned the Island of Java by name<sup>12</sup>. His *Geography* is commonly held to be the earliest source on Java. Written sometime between 151 and 165 CE, it was an important source of information up to the 15th and 16th century. In the seventh book at the end of chapter two, Ptolemy speaks of Java -or as he has it *Iabadaius*- as a very fertile island:

“...Iabadaius or Barley Island is said to be a most fruitful one, and to produce much gold. This has a metropolis on the north side toward the west called Argentea...” (Stevenson 1932: 157)

On the religion or the character of the Javanese we find nothing in Ptolemy. To him, and arguably to his medieval readers, Java is just a faraway island of great riches. This second century description of Java as an island of gold and barley remained a topic of interest up to the 18th and 19th century (Valentyn 1858, Vol. 3 [1724-1726]: 320; Kern 1869; Pijnappel 1870). Therefore, it is an excellent example of the third element in the horizon of expectation of our early travellers: Java is an island of great riches.

Another source of information for the first Europeans sailing the spice route would have been the journals of Medieval travellers. There aren't many such journals around and even fewer mention Java in particular. One such an account, by the hand of a Franciscan friar by the name of Odoric, shows how the fascination with the riches of Java still prevailed more than a thousand years after Ptolemy. From his visit to Java in the 1320s he deems noteworthy only the spices that can be found there and the most fantastic wealth of its king:

“Then I travelled further unto another island called Java, the compass of which by sea is three thousand miles. The king of this island has seven other crowned kings under his jurisdiction. The island is thoroughly inhabited, and is thought to be one of the principal islands of the whole world. In the same island there grows great plenty of cloves, camphor, and nutmegs, and in a word all kinds of spices are there to

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<sup>12</sup> Pliny the Elder also mentions Java (although not by name) in the context of a description of spice routes. This remark, however, is even more fleeting than that of Ptolemy and seems not to have attracted as much attention of scholars as is the case with Ptolemy (Kern 1869).

be had, and great abundance of all victuals except wine. The king of this land of Java has a most brave and sumptuous palace, the most loftily built that ever I saw. It has most high staircases leading up to the rooms, of silver and of gold alternately, throughout the whole building. Also the lower rooms were paved all over with one square plate of silver, and another of gold. All the walls upon the inner side were covered over with plates of beaten gold, whereupon were engraven the pictures of knights, each having around his head a wreath of gold, adorned with precious stones. The ceiling of the palace was of pure gold. With this king of Java the great Khan of Cathay had many conflicts in war; whom the said king of Java has always overcome and vanquished.” (Komroff 1928: 222-23)

Another such account, dating back to the late 13th century, is the one by Marco Polo. In the minuscule paragraph dedicated to the island of Java, Marco Polo confides to his readers that the Javanese are idolaters, which apparently is of the same level of noteworthiness as the rich spices that one finds there.

“The people there are subject to a powerful king, are *idolaters*, and pay tribute to any other prince. The territory is very rich, yielding pepper, nutmegs, galanga, cubebs, cloves, and all the richest spices.” (Murray 1845: 245; italics mine)

In the middle of the 14th century another Franciscan friar (this time anonymous) wrote the *Book of the knowledge of all the kingdoms, lands, and lordships that are in the world*. In it he devotes a couple of paragraphs to Java in which he hardly mentions anything besides the spices grown and the very exotic animals living there:

"I... sailed over the green sea until we came to the island of Java, a very great island in the Indian Sea, forty days journey in length. In this island there are three very great regions. They call one kingdom Mogoles, another Jauales, another Manbrot. The island is very populous, but there are no cities because all the people live in the country, and *gather spices, pepper and odoriferous gums*. It is a very hot land. The people are black, and they adore the Emperor of Cathay, whose image they have on their flags." (Markham 1912[1877]: 44; italics mine)

"Know that in the islands of Java and Trapouana there are 45 extensive regions, the greater part desolate owing to the great heat of the sun. But in the inhabited parts they gather much *pepper* and many other *spices*. Here are the great *griffins* and *cockatrices*." (ibid.: 43; italics mine)

In this last quote we find the fourth characteristic expectation of the travellers to Java: the presence of fabulous, exotic and even bizarre flora and fauna -in this case fantastic animals such as the cockatrice, a two-legged dragon with a rooster's head, and the griffin, with his body of a lion and the wings of an eagle.

From these characteristics we can deduce what the expectations of the early travellers to Java would have been: it is an island of splendid riches, there is an abundance of spices, the flora and fauna is exotic and fabulous, and it is inhabited by idolatrous Javanese. As we will see, the sources from 1500 till about 1800 are indeed confined by these expectations.

### 2.3. The Heathens and Muslims of Java

In the late 15th century the Portuguese were finding their way to the Indies. The arrival of the Dutch and English a century later, unleashed a fierce competition between these three parties. The sources, then, from this period were mostly written by men in the service of either the Portuguese, the English or the Dutch.

#### 2.3.1. The confines of description: great expectations?

The travel accounts that became popular amongst the general public, do not treat the religion of Java as an object of interest in its own right. That is to say, we do not find a chapter or even small section devoted exclusively to Javanese religion. Only interspersed between stories about the produces and riches of Java, the exotic flora and fauna, the kings and kingdoms, and the bizarre or depraved mores of the Javanese, do we find the earliest descriptions of the religion of the Javanese.

The above sketched expectations are echoed in the accounts of the early travellers. Java's abundance of spices is virtually always mentioned, as is the extraordinary and the bizarre. A case in point is Antonio Pigafetta's account of the voyage around the world from 1519 to 1522 by the Portuguese Magellan. He hardly devotes a page to Java, but he does mention the Javanese practice of widow burning (*sati*), just before he delves into a hearsay story of the *Campanganghi* tree in which the (mythological) *Garuda* birds supposedly dwell:

"They told us that in Java Major, it was the custom when one of the chief men died, to burn his body; and then his principal wife, adorned with garlands of flowers, has herself carried in a chair by four men throughout the town, with a tranquil and smiling countenance, whilst comforting her relations, who are afflicted because she is going to burn herself with the corpse of her husband, and encouraging them not to lament, (...) Afterwards, when close to the place of the pyre, she again turns towards the relations, and after again consoling them, casts herself into the fire and is burned. If she did not do this she would not be looked upon as an honourable woman, nor as a faithful wife.

Our old pilot related to us other extravagant things. He told us that the young men of Java [text missing in the original] and that in an island called Ocoloro, below Java Major, there are only women who become pregnant with the wind, and when they bring it forth, if the child is a male, they kill it, (...)

They also related to us that beyond Java Major (...) there is an enormous tree named Campanganghi, in which dwell certain birds named Garuda, so large that they take with their claws, and carry away flying, a buffalo, and even an elephant, to the place of the tree, which place is named Puzathaer. The fruit of this tree is called Buapanganghi, and is larger than a water melon." (Stanley 1874:154-55)

The bizarre and base morals of the Javanese are a constant in the travel accounts and are often discussed in combination with their 'low' religion. The Englishman Thomas Herbert who visited, amongst other regions, the Indonesian archipelago in the 1620s describes the religion and the moral character of the Javanese in this typical fashion. The Javanese commit the most horrible crimes for which they ask pardon from their

idols. The religion of the Javanese, by the way, is worship of the Devil. We find Herbert's rendition of the Javanese religion and base morals crammed between geographical descriptions and an enumeration of Javanese crops:

"... their sole braverie is in their crizes; a weapon, commonly two foot long, broad, waved, sharp edged, and small pointed; but (against the lawes of Nature, and honour) basely poisoned: the hilt or handle usually of wood or horne, (some have them of gold, silver, and Ivory) cut into the crooked shape or figure of a deformed Pagod: yet were they a thousand times more ugly, these savages would dare to adore them; especially, in that *they aske the Idoll on their creast pardon, after they have perpetrated homicide or such like villany (...)* these Javans are *drunck in their demonomy*; they the more earnestly imbrace it, by how much their poysoned natures abhorre honesty. They trade in murders, adulterie, thefts, rapine, deceit, and all kinds of knaveries: *Magique also, and Astrologie delights them*: a study their Priests are excellent in, and *in which Satan instructs them*; the better to oblige their gratitude, and *to worship him as the Apollo of knowledge (...)* *They know Mahomet in some parts of the Ile*, who as an infectious ayre is suckt by many people of remote Ilands." (Herbert 1638: 324-25; italics mine)

The depiction of the Javanese as idolaters or Devil worshippers -notice that even though Mohammed is mentioned, Herbert speaks of the Javanese only as idolaters and not as Muslims or Mohammedans- makes sense within Herbert's knowledge of the world. After all, as the Bible relates, all men and nations descended from Noah. Those who had strayed from the true religion, and most of mankind had, were per definition idolaters, *i.e.* adherents of a false religion, and of course it was the Devil who had led them from the true path. The history of the world was still the Biblical history and Herbert's depiction of Javanese religion shows how such Biblical truths were part and parcel of the common sense view of the world. Another illustration is Herbert's speculation on the origin of Java's name. It was Tharsis, the great-grandson of Noah who, as everybody knows, had populated these parts of Asia, and who might have named Java after his brother Javan:

“Whence this great and noble Ile is called Iava, I confesse my ignorance. I dare not say from Iavan (Iaphets sonne) grandson of Noah in that most agree, he planted Greece. But by reason his own brother Tharsis peopled these parts, why might he not from his brothers name (to eternize his memory) borrow the denomination.” (ibid.: 325)

Incidentally, according to the famous Rijkloff van Goens, who represented the VOC during several embassies to the Mataram court in Middle-Java between 1648 and 1654, the Javanese are actually descendants of Noah’s son Ham. He bases this remarkable insight on the uncanny wickedness of the Javanese, which indubitably must have come from Ham (Van Goens 1856: 355-56). Furthermore, van Goens knows, ever since “Pangeran Crappia” the founder of Mataram, converted to the “Mohametan sect” in about 1576 the Javanese have been forced to become Muslim (ibid.: 357).

Examples such as these -and there are many similar ones to be found- illustrate how the accounts of the early travellers do not exceed the confines as stipulated above: Java is an Island of great riches, where bizarre plants and animals are found, and which is inhabited by an idolatrous nation with base morals. In the following paragraphs we will focus specifically on how the religion of the Javanese is represented in these accounts.

### 2.3.2. Mohammedans and Heathens: brief and superficial descriptions

The quotes in the following paragraph are representative of how European travellers experienced and depicted the religion of the Javanese during the time span from roughly 1500 to 1800. These depictions share a number of characteristics. As already pointed out, the religion of the Javanese is always mentioned in a sort of offhand manner: one would inform his reader of the religion of the Javanese as one would inform him of the topography of Java, its spices, Java’s kings and kingdoms, recent battles and treatises, arms and armour, Javanese clothes and physical appearances. Another shared characteristic is how these descriptions are quite brief and, on the whole, rather superficial too. Brief, because most of the accounts themselves usually contain no more than a couple of



pages, sometimes hardly a paragraph, on Java and even less on the religion of its inhabitants. Superficial, because the descriptions of religion in Java usually go no further than merely calling it Mohammedanism or Heathenism. These then, are the two terms most often used to depict the religion of the Javanese. Finally, on the few occasions when a bit more detail is offered, the authors do seem to notice something ‘odd’ about the Javanese religious condition. We will return to these ‘oddities’ later on, when we discuss some familiar themes in these descriptions.

Amongst the first Portuguese to arrive in the Malay-Indonesia area was the Portuguese apothecary Tomé Pires. His account of Java is one of the longest and most detailed of the travel accounts from this period<sup>13</sup>. In the year 1513 he stayed in Java and from his experiences there he learned to distinguish between Heathens and Moors (whom he also dubs Mohammedans). For example:

"He [The lord of Surabaya, Pate Bubat] is closely related to the *Moorish* pates." (Cortêsão 1944: 196; italics mine)

And:

"He [The lord of Surabaya, Pate Bubat] is very much at war with the pate of Blambangan, who is a *heathen* enemy of his." (ibid.: 196; italics mine)

Another early 16th century description of Java is by the hand of the Portuguese Duarte Barbosa. According to his 1516 *A description of the coasts of East Africa and Malabar in the beginning of the sixteenth century*, Java is inhabited by “Gentiles” and “Moors”:

“Further on than this said island towards the western quarter and the south there are many islands small and great, amongst which there is one very large which they call Java the Great; it is one hundred and twenty leagues distant from the Cape of Malaca to the south south east, and it is inhabited by many *Gentiles and Moors*. And in its seaports there are many towns and villages and *large settlements of Moors, with Moorish kings*. But they are all obedient to *the king of the island*,

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<sup>13</sup> Since Pires’ account remained unpublished until 1944, I am discussing it as an instance of a Western observation of Javanese religion, and not as an account that influenced successive generations of descriptions.

*who is a Gentile, and lives in the interior of the country, and is a great lord called Patevdara, and sometimes some rebel against him, and afterwards he again subjugates them.*" (Stanley 1866: 197; italics mine)

The term "Gentiles" is synonymous with Heathens, "Moors" however could mean either Muslims in general or Arabs in particular. It's hard to decide which Barbosa speaks of. However, in these early sources Moor is often equated with Mohammedan or Muslim. So, we should keep both possibilities open. In Willem Lodewycksz' 1595 tale of Cornelis de Houtman's voyage to the East-Indies we find the same insight: the Javanese are either Muslim or Heathen:

"In Java at the coast they have the *Mohammedan* faith, because in the interior they are *Heathens*, pertaining to the law of Pythagoras, holding to be true, that when man dies the spirit immediately enters another body, therefore they do not eat food that has lived and neither do they kill any animal (...) At the Northern seaside of Java then, they are *Mahomethan*, whose Alcoran they maintain diligently." (Rouffaer 1929: 114; italics mine)<sup>14</sup>

We find an identical observation in Gerret Vermeulen's 1677 *Gedenkwaardige Voyagie van Gerret Vermeulen naar Oost-Indien* (Memorable Voyage of Gerret Vermeulen to the East Indies). In fact, what he has to say about the religion of the Javanese -as little as it is- sounds almost like a repetition of Lodewycksz his account:

"Alongside the whole coast of Java they [the Javanese] are almost all *Mohammedans*: but in the interior all of them are *Heathens* who, like the Pythagoreans, think that the souls pass from one body to the other and hence eat nothing that has

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<sup>14</sup> My translation of: "In lava ende dat aende Zee cant hebben zy het Mahometische ghelooove: want te lande in zijn zy Heydenen, houdende de Wet van Pitagoras, welke is dat zy voor seecker houden, dat de mensche stervende terstonnds den Geest in een ander lichaem oft corpus vaert, derhalven eten zy niet dat leven ghehadt heeft, ende veel min dooden zy eenich ghedierte... Aen de noorder zeecant van lava dan, zijn zy Mahometist, diens Alcoran zy diligenter onderhouden."

lived and do not kill animals.“ (Vermeulen 1677: 27-28; italics mine)<sup>15</sup>

François Valentijn was a Protestant minister in the service of the VOC. He is famous for his 1724-1726 *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën* (Old and New East Indies) which describes the history of the VOC and all the territories it ruled. This compilation was largely based on knowledge from the VOC archives and is one of the few, if not the only, instance of such knowledge made public during the period the VOC was still active. Interestingly, these archives in turn were to a large degree based on Portuguese knowledge and sources (Van Goor 2004: 61). Valentijn records that at the beginning of the 18th century the Javanese are either Muslim or Heathen:

“It is also certain that the Javanese brought the old *Heathen* religion that, before the introduction of *Mohammedanism*, used to persist amongst the rulers of Majapahit and also was found in many districts in Java, from the coast of Coromandel and they religiously honoured and in some places still honour the supreme gods of those lands, Brama and Es-wara.” (Valentyn 1858, Vol. 3 [1724-1726]: 320; italics mine)<sup>16</sup>

We find a similar rendition of the religion in Java in Johan Splinter Stavorinus’ account of his trip to the East Indies during the period from 1768 till 1771. Like his predecessors, Stavorinus too notes that the Javanese are either Mohammedans (most of them are) or are still practising idolaters:

“Their religion is the *Mohammedan*, which is predominant over the whole island. It is said, that far inland, over the

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<sup>15</sup> My translation of: “Langs de geheele kust van Java zijn sy bijna alle Mahometanen: maer landwaerts in alle Heidenen de welken gelijk de Pythagoristen achten dat de zielen van ‘t een in ‘t ander lichaem overgaen en dieshalven niets eten dat leven gehad heeft en geen beesten doden.”

<sup>16</sup> My translation of: “Het is ook zeker, dat de Javanen de oude heidensche godsdienst, die, voor ‘t invoeren van ‘t Mohammedisdom, onder de madjapaitsche vorsten plagt stand te grijpen en ook nog in veel gewesten van Java gevonden werd, van de kust van Choromandel gebragt [hebben], en dat zij de opper-goden van die landen, Brama en Es-wara, godsdienstig geëerd hebben en op sommige plaatsen nog eeren.”

mountains, towards the south side of the island, there are still some of the old *idolaters* left. The Mohammedans have their Mosques, or places of prayer, all over the island, one of which is very famous near Cheribon, but I did not see it.” (Stavorinus 1793: 204-205; italics mine)<sup>17</sup>

Not all authors, however, make the distinction between Mohammedans or Heathens. Christophorius Frikius, for example, a surgeon in the service of the VOC during the 1680s simply calls the Javanese “barbaric Heathens” (Frik, Hesse, Schweitzer 1694: 54).

The above quotes show that in the period of about 1500 to 1800 the religion of the Javanese was captured with only two terms: Mohammedanism and Heathenism. They also show that the little attention paid to Javanese religion was matched by a particular kind of poverty in descriptive tools.

#### 2.4. Conceptual context and structuring concepts

As we saw, these early travellers did not just label the religion of the Javanese, they also described it, although very concisely. These descriptions are structured around two concepts: belief and practice. Moreover, these descriptions did not stand on their own, but were part of a larger framework from which they received their intelligibility.

This larger framework, or conceptual context, is in fact a Christian theological framework. In this period, according to the Western, Biblical or theological understanding of the world, only 4 religions were thought to exist: Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Heathenism. Each of these were assigned a rung on a ladder. The top position was occupied by Christianity, one rung lower was Judaism, then came Islam and finally Heathenism (Sens 2001; Masazawa 2005). In these accounts Heathenism is sometimes equated with the absence of religion, but most often with what

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<sup>17</sup> My translation of: “Hunne godsdienst is de Mahomedaansche, die 't geheele Eiland door de heerschende is. Men zegt, dat er diep landinwaards in, over het gebergte, naar den zuidkant van 't Eiland, nog van de oude Afgodendieners zouden overig zijn. De Mahomedaanen hebben over al door 't land hunne *Moske's*, of bidplaatsen, waar van er een zeer beroemde is bij *Chirebon*, doch welke ik niet gezien heb.”

today we would call polytheism. This kind of religion was considered to be the furthest digression possible from the true path. The Heathens were thought to have been led astray by the Devil and were thus blind for the truth. Judaism and Islam at least recognised one God instead of many, and were therefore a notch up. However, since Judaism did not recognise that Jesus was the Messiah and Islam considered Jesus to be merely a prophet, the followers of these two religions were also thought to have fallen into false beliefs. Only Christianity was the true religion, and hence all other religions were necessarily false. Therefore, within this theological framework it made sense to talk about the Javanese as Heathens and Muslims and to associate their ‘false’ religion to their wickedness and bizarre customs. After all, having strayed from the true path and being led by the Devil, cannot but imply having base morals.

How are the descriptions of Javanese religion structured? The quoted accounts depict the Javanese as prone to idolatry and superstition. Consider, for example, Valentyn’s story about the “Panombahan” (prob. *Panembahan*, ruler) and “Depati” (i.e. *adipati*, colonial term for *bupati*, regent) of Surabaya who do not want to go to battle before the new moon:

“Now, everything was set and ready for marching, but the *Mohammedan superstition* was the reason that the Panombahan and the Depati Soerabaja did not want to start the campaign until after the new moon, asserting that all would turn out badly for them, if however they would wait, all would succeed.” (Valentyn 1858, Vol. 3 [1724-1726]: 435; italics mine)<sup>18</sup>

Another example is Elias Hesse who in the 1680s describes the Javanese religious condition as follows:

“As far as the religion or the suspected worship is concerned, they [the Javanese] used to be Heathens. With great effort they have been brought to the *Mohammedan idolatry* by

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<sup>18</sup> My translation of: “Alles was nu ter marsch klaar; doch het Mohammedaansch bijgeloof was oorzaak, dat de Panombahan en de Depati Soerabaja niet eer, dan na de nieuwe maan, op den togt wilden, vast stellende, dat hen alles tegenloopen, maar zoo zij die eerst afwachten, alles wel gelukken zou.” A century later Carel Poensen will talk about this Javanese practice of auspicious and inauspicious days in the same terms (1864: 259-62).

the zeal of the Moors.” (Frik, Hesse, Schweitzer 1694: 223:  
italics mine)<sup>19</sup>

With “idolatry” is meant the worship of (a) false god(s) and with “superstition” the belief in false teachings or the adherence to false beliefs -this includes beliefs that are not sanctioned by reason or evidence. Islam is thus by authors such as Valentyn and Hesse considered as a false teaching and the worship of a false God. In a similar vein, the accounts of this period speak of Heathen idolatry and superstition. A case in point is the mentioned depiction by Herbert of the Javanese asking an idol (i.e. a false god) for pardon (Herbert 1638: 324-25). For Western eyes, such behaviour counted as an act of idolatry, which in its turn was thought to be based on a specific superstition, viz. the belief that this (false) Javanese god can pardon the crimes one has committed. In fact, idolatry, is the expression of a superstition. In other words, the descriptions of Javanese religion (either Mohammedanism or Heathenism) are structured with the concepts of belief and practice, whereby the religious beliefs are thought to underlie religious practices. Summarising, both the concepts of Mohammedanism and Heathenism are structured as follows: both are false religions, which implies that the followers of these religions hold to certain superstitions, some of which are expressed in the idolatries they practise.

From this conceptual context and these structuring concepts we learn that the theoretical apparatus with which these early travellers described and understood the Javanese religious condition was rather limited. For more than three centuries the religious life of a nation as large and diverse as the Javanese, home to a variety of cultures and traditions, was captured with only four concepts: Mohammedanism, Heathenism, superstition, and idolatry. This is, by any standard, very poor. Moreover, the basic thought that is expressed by the concepts of superstition and idolatry is that of a false religion which is, in the end, a theological claim. It also shows that these Westerners would have trouble identifying and describing any phenomena alien to their own cultural experience. There simply weren't any epistemological tools to make sense of Javanese tradi-

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<sup>19</sup> My translation of: “Wat nu haere Religie, of gewaenden Godsdienst betreft/ voortijds waerense Heydenen. Sijn echter/ door de vlijt der Mooren, met grootte moyte tot de Mahometaensche Afgodery gebracht geworden.”

tions (religious and others) that were so radically different from their own.

## 2.5. The contours of a *Gestalt*: first appearances of familiar themes<sup>20</sup>

The sources from this period also show the emergence of a number of themes that will recur time and again in the discourse on Javanese Islam. Here they appear in a very rudimentary stage, but as the study of Java evolves over the centuries these themes are reworked over and over with more detail added to them.

### 2.5.1. Proof of being Muslim: the practice of certain Islamic precepts

At this point in our genealogy it is not very relevant to point out that these early travellers did not have great knowledge of Islam. This is already aptly evidenced by their insistence on calling this religion Mohammedanism, the law of Mohammed, or the false religion of Mohammed. Still, it seems that some authors were aware of Islam's precepts and prohibitions. An early illustration is the account of Elias Hesse we have already referred to above. The full quote has it that:

“As far as the religion or the presumed worship of God is concerned, they [the Javanese] used to be Heathens. With great effort they have been brought to the Mohammedan idolatry by the zeal of the Moors. They have themselves circumcised. They celebrate their Sabbath with the utmost devotion on Friday. *They adhere in a strict manner to some of the laws of the Al Qur'an*, which wasn't known to these nations before about 1560. At that time Heathenism received such a blow that today most of the countries, yes the entire East until the Maluku island and Amboina, appear to follow the

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<sup>20</sup> I use the term *Gestalt* to refer to “structures of cognitive and perceptive experience” (Smith 1988: 13).

Turkish prophet Mohammed.” (Frik, Hesse, Schweitzer 1694: 223-24; italics mine)<sup>21</sup>

Even though Hesse identifies Mohammed as a Turkish prophet, his quote exemplifies that even very early on Western observers had at least some idea of what was implied in being Muslim. Furthermore, his account holds some of the typical elements in the common sense story of Javanese Islam. Firstly, Hesse points out a number of characteristics that ‘prove’ that the Javanese are Muslim: they are circumcised, they go to Friday prayer, and they uphold *some* of the Islamic laws. Unfortunately for us, Hesse does not specify which laws the Javanese do and do not adhere to. This then is an early expression of a familiar theme: the Javanese are Muslim because they practice certain precepts from Islam.

### 2.5.2. Java’s quick conversion to Islam

Secondly, we read in this quote, that the Javanese have been brought to Islam around 1560. Before that moment they were still Heathen, and after that moment they had become Muslim. As we saw in chapter one, the date of Java’s conversion to Islam is of particular interest to the scholars of Java. Usually it is tied to the fall of the Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit and the rise of the Mataram sultanate. Exact dates are not our concern here. It is more relevant that the victory and rise of Islamic powers -usually identified as Demak and Mataram- are regarded as evidence for Islam becoming the religion of the Javanese. Moreover, most scholars point out the short period in which the whole of Java converted to Islam. Hesse, who visited Java perhaps a 100 years after the conquest of Majapahit, labelled all Javanese as Muslim. He attributes this quick conversion to the “zeal of the Moors”. Today, it is usually attributed to the fundamental similarities between the preceding Hindu-Buddhist religion and

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<sup>21</sup> My translation of: “Wat nu haere *Religie*, of gewaenden Godsdienst betreft voortijds waerense *Heydenen*. Sijn echter/ door de vlijt der *Mooren*, met grootte moyte tot de *Mabometaensche* Afgodery gebracht geworden. Sy laten sigh besnijden. Vieren haeren Sabbath met seer grootte aendaght op den *Vrydagb*. Houden sigh seer vast aen eenige Wetten des *Alcorans*. Welcke deese Volckeren niet voor ontrent ‘t Jaer 1560. bekend is geweest. Ter dier tijd bequam ‘t *Heydendom* soodaenigh een stoot/ dat tegenwoordigh de meeste Landen jae gantsch Oosten/ tot aen de *Moluckische* Eylanden en *Amboina*, den *Turkschen Propheet Mohameth* schijnen aen te hangen”



the kind of Islam, viz. Sufism, that was spread in Java. These similarities, the current argument goes, ensured that the Javanese could easily accept the new religion. We will return to this argument in the course of this dissertation. This then is the second familiar theme in the story about Javanese Islam: the quick conversion to Islam.

### 2.5.3. Superficial Islam and absence of true belief

The third familiar theme that emerges in these early sources is the depiction of the Javanese Muslim who is not a true believer, or only a superficial Muslim. We find an example of this in the account of Tomé Pires, who expresses doubt as to the firmness of belief of the king of Tuban. Pires notices a deficiency in this man's belief:

“His people speaks to him from afar, but he embraces us and hopes that through his truth and good [faith] he will come to be chief person in Java. He is a man between fifty-five and sixty. He is Javanese by birth; *his grandfather was a heathen and afterwards became Mohammedan. This man does not seem to me to be a very firm believer in Mohammed.*” (Corteseo 1944: 191; italics mine; addition [faith] in original)

The reason that Tomé Pires doubts this man's sincerity is apparently that through his “good faith” the king of Tuban hopes to become a chief person in Java. That is to say, he is not so much concerned about the afterlife or his soul, but much more about success and prosperity in this life. He seems to consider his pertaining to Islam as a guarantee for that.

Not being a true believer comes very close to not being really Muslim. We could find an early expression of such a description in the letters of Commander Morgenstern, who lived in Semarang from 1771 to 1776. In 1772 he claims that all Javanese are Muslim:

“The Javanese all adhere to the *Mohammedan religion*, which is the reason they can take as many wives as they want to.” (Morgenstern 1786: 105; italics mine)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> My translation of: “Die Javanen sind alle der mahomedanischen Religion zugethan, darum können sie so viele Weiber nehmen, wie sie wollen.”

However, about a year later in 1773 he seems to have changed his opinion. While describing an interview with a young Javanese girl whom he is considering to take on as a maid, he discusses the fact that Javanese girls lose their virginity at a very young age. This he attributes to the fact that the Javanese are all Heathen:

“In this country they already start this kind of handy work at the age of nine or ten, and they have no idea that it is a sin, while they are *heathen* who do not know anything of God.” (ibid.: 173-74; italics mine)<sup>23</sup>

How did Morgenstern start out by calling the Javanese Muslims -which he relates to polygamy- and after a year of interaction with the Javanese end up calling them Heathens -which he relates to having sexual relations at a young age? As the term ‘Heathen’ can apply both to those who do not adhere the Semitic religions (excluding Muslims) as to non-Christians in general (including Muslims), there is some ambiguity to his statements.

#### 2.5.4. The Javanese adhere to practices from different beliefs

Fourthly, the accounts also testify to how the Javanese seem to adhere to practices from different beliefs. Christophorus Schweitzer, an accountant, living in Java in the 1680s speaks of the Javanese as follows:

“... the Javanese, [the] proper inhabitants of this island; most of them [are] black-yellow folks, who around their waist wear a skirt of linen or silk, and who have themselves circumcised like the Turks: otherwise they worship a fabricated statue with a lion head; honour sun and moon, etc.” (Frik, Hesse, Schweitzer 1694: 351)<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> My translation of: “Sie fangen hier zu Lande schon im neunten oder zehnten Jahre an, dieses Handwerk zu treiben, wissen auch gar nichts davon, daß es Sünde ist, denn es sind Heiden, die von Gott nichts wissen.”

<sup>24</sup> My translation of: “... *Javanen*, eygentlijke Inwooners deeses Eylands; meerendeel swart-geele Liedien; welke om haer midden een kleejje draegen van Lijnwaed of Sijde; en sigh laeten Besnijden gelijk de *Turcken*: Anders aanbiddense een gemaect Beeld met een Leeuwen-kop; eren Son en Maen, Etc.”

Stavorinus, who visited Java a number of times between 1768 and 1778, paints a similar picture:

“Their religion is that of the Mohammedans; *yet is accompanied by many superstitions, which they have retained from the religion of their ancestors, who were all Heathens*; the further to the interior, the more they cannot form any other ideas, besides those that fall within the immediate reach of their gross senses. The Mohammedan religion was introduced here by the Arabs.” (Stavorinus 1798: 270; italics mine)<sup>25</sup>

This then is the fourth familiar theme: the Javanese Muslims adhere to both Islamic and pre-Islamic religious practices. This description will develop, over time, into the idea of syncretist Javanese Islam.

These four themes -adherence to some of Islam’s precepts, smooth conversion, superficial belief/nominal Islam, mixing of religious practices-constantly recur in the descriptions of Javanese religion. We find them in the missionary reports, in the works of the orientalist and the scholarly endeavours of social scientists. Taken together they are the contours of a *Gestalt* that is slowly taking shape. However, and this is an important remark, it takes shape within a discourse on Javanese religion that was brought forth by the West.

## 2.6. Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the earliest sources describing the religion of the Javanese, as they pertain to the genealogy of ‘Javanese Islam’. Although there are Chinese and Arab sources on Java that precede the ones discussed, they have never been constituent to the way we in the social sciences today think of Javanese religion. At best they are brought in to corroborate or refute some historical elements. Therefore, since the focus of the genealogy at hand is to retrace how our current understand-

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<sup>25</sup> My translation of: “Hun Godsdienst is die der Mahomedaanen; doch met veel bijgeloovigheden vergezeld, die zij nog van den Godsdienst hunner voorouderen, die alle Heidenen waren, hebben overgehouden; en hoe verder landwaards in, hoe meer zij zich geen andere denkbeelden kunnen vormen, dan die onmiddelijk onder het bereik hunner grove zintuigen vallen. De Mahomedaansche Godsdienst is hier door de Arabieren ingevoerd.”

ing of Javanese Islam has come about, these sources need not be discussed here. The first conclusion to draw is thus: the description of Javanese religion is a part of a Western enterprise to make sense of Javanese cultural and religious reality.

So far we have discussed the first step in this enterprise. As we saw, we can already discern the contours of a familiar entity, viz. Javanese Islam as it is conceptualised today. It is important to note that these contours are actually feats that Western observers considered salient. For example, it seemed relevant for Western observers to mention that the Javanese did not appear to be firm believers of Islam. In their eyes, it was telling that the Javanese adhere both to Islamic and pre-Islamic religious practices. In other words, the reports tell us what is salient about Javanese religion to the West -and not per se what is salient about it to the Javanese. Therefore, our second conclusion must be that the story about Javanese Islam is from the beginning a Western story and consequently it tells us something about the way the West experienced Javanese culture.

The descriptions of these Western visitors to Java display a certain structure. With this structure they managed to lend intelligibility to the experiences they recounted. After all, the culture they encountered in Java was utterly alien to them and thus had to be made sense of in order to be able to go about in it. The structure in their descriptions shows how and with which concepts this was done. As we saw, there was a limit to what could and could not be understood -as sketched by the horizon of expectation. Moreover, the available conceptual framework and structuring concepts -i.e. the conceptual reservoir- was not only very limited but also limiting. Not only was it inconceivable that the Javanese would not have religion, they almost certainly adhered to a false one. We have seen that these ideas and concepts are in origin Christian theological. Our third conclusion therefore must be that it was Christian theology that provided the concepts with which the West lent structure to its experience of Javanese culture.

We started off our genealogy on the premise that the prevalent understanding of Javanese Islam cannot but be a misunderstanding of the Javanese religious condition. Ever since Edward Said's *Orientalism* the origins of such misrepresentations are more or less routinely located in the colonial past. The post-colonial stance on 'Javanese Islam' is no ex-

ception to this. Usually orientalist philologists in service of the Netherlands Indies are deemed responsible for having come up with the depiction of the Javanese as nominal Muslims. Sometimes the missionaries are bestowed with this 'honour'. In both instances the 'creation' is thought to have taken place in the second half of the 19th century. However, in this chapter we have seen that already as early as the 17th century the VOC was systematically gathering knowledge about its territories, which it disseminated amongst its functionaries. Surely Java was no exception to this. It is also clear that this knowledge served the sole purpose of Dutch hegemony. What the VOC knew and wanted to know about Java was meant to facilitate the establishment and maintenance of their sphere of power. Therefore, any serious critique of the concept of syncretist Javanese Islam as a wilful misrepresentation on the part of a colonial power, must delve a lot deeper than the odd reference to a few 19th century orientalists. It must also address the continuity running from Portuguese rule, over VOC hegemony, to the Netherlands Indies. Then, it has to show how this explains the emergence of the concept of 'Javanese Islam', with its characteristic features as discussed in this chapter. We should keep these caveats in mind when we turn to the next period in the conceptual genealogy: that of the first orientalists.



### 3. Orientalism: early scientific study of Java

This chapter is devoted to early orientalist scholarship on Java. One of the focal points is the relationship of the colonial power structure to the knowledge of Javanese religion. If there is a continuity in the way Javanese religion has been described -and I argue there is- and if there is a 'political' continuity running from Portuguese times to the period of the Netherlands East Indies -which seems to be the case- does the latter offer an explanation for the former? In other words, does the post-colonial adage that the misrepresentation of colonised nations, their culture, and religions is a function of colonial hegemony, help us in understanding how the concept 'Javanese Islam' came about?

#### 3.1. Popular orientalism in Java

At this moment in our story, at the beginning of the 19th century, the Europeans had been in Java for over 200 years. During the period from about 1780 until 1830 Java had witnessed the demise of the VOC, an interregnum of the Napoleonic and British rule, and a (re-)instalment of Dutch rule. As the name of the colonial state -The Dutch East Indies- indicates, the Indonesian archipelago and Java in particular had become a tropical home to the Dutch.

Brief excursions into the interior of Java had become a popular pastime for these residing Europeans. Such trips would span a couple of days and would typically include visits to one or more temple ruins and a stop-over in a small village or hamlet, while during the rides to and from the sights, the excursionists would enjoy the scenery. Such trips were often described in a sort of diary, to be published for the entertainment and education of their colonial counterparts and the interested public *in patria*. These excursions illustrate a lively curiosity for Javanese culture, particularly for ancient Javanese culture, that had become fashionable in the wake of Raffles' governorship over Java (Termorshuizen 1993).

A typical example is a trip through the Eastern parts of Java made by N. van Meeteren Brouwer, notary and auctioneer in Surabaya, in 1825. The account of the trip was published three years later in *Mnemosyne*, a Dutch

journal dedicated to history and literature. Regarding the sights he has this to say:

“... on that trip we saw old ruins, still partly present temples and necropolises of the old *Brabmanic* or *Hindu* religion.” (Van Meerteren Brouwer 1828: 300; italics mine)<sup>26</sup>

Especially people of a certain education, such as clerics or government officials, sent in essays to e.g. The Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences or to government gazettes, describing their trip and maybe an ancient inscription or some temple ruins they had encountered. Another such author is the civil servant Hendrik Domis, resident of respectively Semarang, Pasuruan and Surabaya during the 1820s. He had already published several essays on archaeological findings (inscriptions and temples in particular) in the *Transactions of the Batavian Society*, when he published his *De residentie Passoeroeang op het eiland Java* (The residence Pasuruan on the Island Java). In it he seeks to further the knowledge on the Eastern part of the Island, using the notes he assembled during his period as resident of Pasuruan from 1826 to 1830. On the religion of the Javanese he says the following:

“Generally speaking the native here has embraced the Mohammedan religion. The great ones show a great interest in their faith. There are many priests. There is a lot of superstition. The lesser Javanese, especially in the interior, even though they have adopted *the exteriority of the Mohammedan religion*, are not very familiar with the moral part of it, yes many natives merely know the names of their religious customs, and still sacrifice to the *Hindu* statues and holy trees and places, that are to be found abundantly.” (Domis 1836: 31-32; italics mine)<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> My translation of: “... wij zagen op die reis oude ruïnes, gedeeltelijk nog aanwezige Tempels en Grafsteden der oude Braminsche of Hindosche Godsdienst.”

<sup>27</sup> My translation of: “De inlander heeft alhier in het algemeen de Mahomedaanse Godsdienst omhelsd. De grooten leggen veel belangstelling voor hun geloof aan den dag. De priesters zijn talrijk. Er heerscht veel bijgeloof. De mindere Javaan, vooral in de binnenlanden, hoezeer het uiterlijke van de Mohamedaansche Godsdienst aangenomen hebbende, is met het zedelijk gedeelte daarvan meest onbekend, ja vele inboorlingen kennen van hunnen godsdienstige gebruiken niet veel meer dan de namen, en offeren nog aan de Hindoebeelden en heilige boomen en plaatsen, die men in menigte aantreft.”



What catches the eye in these two descriptions is that they refer to the old religion of Java as Hinduism. As we saw in the previous chapter, Stavorinus in the 1760s still spoke of the religion of Javanese Heathen ancestors (Stavorinus 1798: 270). Even as late as 1800, Dirk Van Hogendorp, another prominent Dutch civil servant, still described the Javanese religion as follows:

“The religion of the Javanese is generally speaking the Mohammedan, though blended with a lot of superstition, originating from the old *beathen religion*...” (Van Hogendorp 1800: 4; italics mine)<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, these accounts not only illustrate Western interest in exotic Java or the popularity of publications on archaeology. They also show that sometime in the first decades of the 19th century the pre-Islamic religion of the Javanese, previously dubbed Heathenism, had become known as Hinduism. This chapter discusses and assesses this next phase in the genealogy of ‘Javanese Islam’ by looking specifically at the contributions of Thomas Raffles and John Crawfurd.

### 3.2. Orientalism: philology, hegemony and mission

It is no exaggeration to say that Raffles and Crawfurd had a lasting impact on the academic research of Java and on the appreciation of Javanese culture. For example, their works have been of seminal importance for the domain of Javanese philology. Moreover, while during the VOC era the knowledge of Java was more or less restricted to the Northern coastal regions, during and after Raffles’ governorship the interior of Java and the indigenous way of life became subjects of scientific study and popular fascination. An illustration of their impact is the sudden boom in the popular interest for all things (Hindu-)Javanese.

Raffles’ 1817 *The History of Java* is considered a breakthrough in the study of Java. It quickly became an absolute authority, and the references to it in later works are innumerable. Almost immediately after its apparition and for at least half a century, virtually every scholar on Java used Raffles’ *History* as an essential work of reference. Crawfurd’s 1820 *History*

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<sup>28</sup> My translation of: “De godsdienst der Javaanen is over het algemeen de Mahomedaansche, doch met veel bijgeloof vermengd, afkomstig van den ouden heidenschen godsdienst...”

*of the Indian Archipelago* is also one of the standard works on Indonesia and on Java in particular -the biggest part of this work is devoted to it. Both laymen and scholars referred to Crawfurd and Raffles. The first group consists of people such as the mentioned Van Meeteren Brouwer. The second consists of scholars such as J.F.C. Brumund and C. Poensen, who have both contributed greatly to the conceptualisation of 'Javanese Islam' as we shall see later on. They make ample use of the works of these orientalists (e.g. Brumund 1853, Vol 1: 2-22; Poensen 1864), thereby illustrating the importance of both *Histories* to the conceptualisation of Javanese religion. Finally, then, a good example of the kind of authority both still carry, even today, is the use the eminent historian of Java, Ricklefs, makes of them. In order to prove that in the first half of the 19th century Javanese society is "unified in terms of its religious identity", with the negligible exception of some small pockets of Hindus in e.g. the Tenggerese mountains, he refers amongst others to Raffles and Crawfurd (Ricklefs 2007: 10-11). As we have seen this religious identity is the mystic synthesis, and one of its key characteristics is the adherence to the five pillars of Islam.

Before I evaluate Raffles' and Crawfurd's contribution to our knowledge of Javanese religion, I will discuss the originality and breakthrough character of Raffles' 1817 *The History of Java*, which will help us to evaluate its rendition of Javanese religion. Being both civil servants and scholars, Raffles and Crawfurd are often portrayed as the first true orientalists on Java. Moreover, they are considered as the initiators of the scientific study of Java. Although, as we will see, this is not really the case, it is an understandable misconception. After all, Java and especially the interior of Java was still very much uncharted territory. The study of Javanese language had so far been largely neglected. Neither had the VOC's policy of secrecy helped to alleviate this situation. The achievements of Raffles and Crawfurd are of course nothing less than milestones. However, it is still worthwhile to nuance their status as initiators of the study of Java. Firstly, there already was orientalist study on Java, its people, languages, and culture before Raffles and Crawfurd. Secondly, the character of their works is rather that of a compilation or overview of all things to know about Java. In that sense their *Histories* -Raffles' even more so than Crawfurd's- could be said to resemble as much a *memorie* by a VOC official as a scientific treatise.

3.2.1. The academic study of Java preceding Raffles: Leyden and VOC

Prior to the advent of Protestantism in the Netherlands and the Eighty Years' War with Spain (1565-1648), the Catholic university of Louvain in the Southern Netherlands had been the only university in the Netherlands. During the Spanish occupation of the Southern Netherlands, the Northern Netherlands, or Dutch Republic, became bereft of higher education: not only was the Catholic university behind enemy lines, it was not considered a suitable place of higher education for the Protestant youth of Zeeland and Holland. Within this context and just after the (unsuccessful) Spanish siege of Leyden (1573-1574), the university of Leyden was established. From the start Oriental languages were part of the curriculum. Besides Semitic languages, there was a firm focus on Arabic. This is evidenced by the recruitment of scholars such as Josephus Justus Scaliger, who taught Roman languages and antiquity, and Arabic; Raphelengius, who taught Hebrew, and developed an Arabic typeset; and Thomas Erpenius, who taught Arabic and other 'oriental' languages. The reasons for this heavy investment in Arabic were, apart from being purely academic, also practical and religious. Practical: Leyden scholars were called upon to translate documents pertaining to diplomatic and commercial missions. Religious: by acquiring a better knowledge of the religious ideas of Muslims, and by distributing Arabic translations of the Bible and Protestant formularies, there was hope to stimulate proselytisation amongst the Muslims (Drewes 1957: 2). This multiplicity of motives will recur in the later orientalist study of Java.

It did take the university of Leyden significantly longer to start the study of other 'Oriental' languages such as Sanskrit, Old-Javanese, Malay and Javanese. In Germany and England Sanskrit and Old-Javanese (*Kawi*) was already being studied by scholars such as Sir William Jones and Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early 19th century. In Leyden the first chair for Sanskrit was installed in 1865 and was taken up by Hendrik Kern, who also furthered the study of Old-Javanese (ibid.: 7). Indonesian languages only became a university taught subject from 1876 (ibid.: 8). Scholars who set the agenda for decades to come were people such as the mentioned Kern; Brandes, who was specialised in the ancient history and archaeology of Java; Hazeu, who studied mainly Javanese *wayang* and folklore; and Stein Callenfels, whose expertise included Javanese culture, archaeology, and pre-history. Therefore, from this vantage point Crawford

and Raffles might indeed be regarded as initiators of the academic scholarship of Java.

However, Java's languages, peoples, culture and religion had already been on another 'orientalist' agenda for a much longer time. Lists of useful Malay and Javanese vocabulary were already being compiled during the first Dutch ventures into the Indonesian archipelago by people such as Cornelis de Houtman, Frederick de Houtman, and Albert Cornelisz. Ruyl tot Enchuysen (Van Dijk 1993: 67-71). Other typical examples are A. Reland (1677-1718), Nicolaas Engelhard (1761-1831), and F.J. Coyett (1620-1689) (Fasseur 2003: 19-33; Uhlenbeck 1964: 43). By the middle of the 18th century Gordijn had already translated the Javanese chronicle *Sejarah Raja Jawa*. It had been published with notes by van Iperen in the Transactions of the Batavian society in 1779 (Weatherbee 1978: 72). And as early as 1768 a translation of the Cheribon code of Law had already been effectuated (Hazeu 1905 in Uhlenbeck 1964: 43).

As we have seen, the VOC was much more than a trading corporation, it was also a military and political power. A case in point is how during the period 1680-1740 the state of Mataram became increasingly dependent on the military assistance of the VOC. In order to continue its control of the *Pasisir* (Northern coastal region of Java) and in the face of local revolt and military threats from Madura, Susuhunan Pakubuwono I (r. 1704-1719) relied on Dutch support to ascend the throne. In exchange for this support the VOC received trade monopolies and exemption from harbour dues (Nagtegaal 1988; Ricklefs 2001: 105-39). With so much at stake and so much local involvement, it is no surprise that the VOC systematically collected knowledge about the East Indies, serving the expansion and consolidation of its sphere of power. Two examples. Firstly, there were the *Generale Missiven*, the general letters in which the *Heeren Zeventien* (Gentlemen Seventeen), or board of directors of the VOC in the Netherlands, were briefed on the state of affairs. These *Missiven* were composed by the council of the Indies in Batavia, which consisted of older Company bureaucrats who had served in several posts -meaning they were well informed and knew different factories (or trading posts) first-hand. Each council member would have made an overview of a different area in which the Company was active. The joint council then dealt with all factories, according to a set pattern (Van Goor 1992). A second example is the famous 17th century orientalist Herbert

de Jager (1636-1694), who built up an expertise in the art of fortification, botany, and Oriental languages (such as Malay, Persian and Telugu) while in and at the service of the VOC (Van Dijk 1993: 62-63)<sup>29</sup>.

Summarising, while it took until the 19th century for the academic study of Java to really take off, there were already orientalists on Java as early as the 17th century. These operated under the patronage and in the service of the VOC.

### 3.2.2. Raffles *The History of Java*: a 'scientific' *memorie*

Since the impact of *The History of Java* is so undeniably massive, the question is what exactly was its merit. Why did it become such a seminal work? The answer is perhaps as simple as it is disenchanting: it is the very first scholarly attempt at capturing the entire field of Java in one book. The reason it is seminal is not so much *what* is related in it, but rather the fact *that* it relates it. Therefore, the book is a collection, the very first collection, of all available knowledge on Java at that time. However, it was neither the first nor the last *History* of its kind. It was not the last since it would soon be followed by John Crawfurd's 1820 *History of The Indian Archipelago*, which dedicates a large part to the Island of Java. It was neither the first in its kind, because as early as 1784 William Marsden had already published *The History of Sumatra*. Raffles and Marsden knew each other quite well and had on occasion discussed each other's academic endeavours and in the end Raffles wound up modelling his own *History* on Marsden's (Van den Doel and Schaepdrijver 1996: 17; Bastin 2004: 21, 31). Marsden, Raffles, and Crawfurd used the title 'History' in the sense of a 'comprehensive view' or a general descriptive account of a country or region, which is close to the original Greek sense of 'inquiry' (Weatherbee 1978: 68-69 fn. 5). Raffles' *History* thus shares quite a number of characteristics with the *memorie* in the tradition of the VOC, with the main difference that this particular one was made public.

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<sup>29</sup> In general, however, it seems that the VOC invested more energy in the study of Malay than Javanese. The main reason seems to have been that Malay was the language of commerce in the region. There simply was no major incentive to learn local languages in order to execute its principal activity: trade. The little interest paid to language in the VOC's proselytising efforts is clearly demonstrated in the fact that they continued to use Portuguese, i.e. the language of the enemy, as Church language. I thank A.Th. Boone for bringing this point to my attention.

Therefore, I would argue, the main achievement of *The History of Java* is that it brought together and shared with the public at large all available bits and pieces, all shreds of knowledge about Java in a structured way for the first time<sup>30</sup>.

A perusal of the table of contents of *The History of Java* resembles glancing through the cabinet of a 19th century scholar that has on display the many exotic artefacts collected during his travels in the Orient. Subject headings range from “Mountains and Volcanos”, over “Character of the Inhabitants”, “Their Habitations, Dress, and Food” and “Ceremonies of the Court” to “Language” and, “Religion”. However, as pointed out repeatedly, collecting knowledge about Java was not just an end in itself, it also served a purpose, viz. effective government. When Raffles was appointed lieutenant-governor of Java in 1811, he was ordered to introduce an enlightened colonial governance, i.e. a policy that would also take the concerns of the colonial subjects into account. One of his main tasks was substituting the “vexatious system of monopoly” of the VOC with a liberalised economy (Van den Doel and Schaepdrijver 1996: 18). Free trade and a fair system of taxation was thought to be more beneficial to the Javanese than the previous system of forced delivery of export crops. It implied that the Dutch residents (the regional or provincial governors) had to become increasingly more involved in local government. This in turn necessitated an extension of the existing civil service and above all an amelioration of the education of these civil servants. Subsequent generations of colonial government in the Netherlands Indies would continue to struggle with the problem of adequately training civil servants to meet their task in the East (Fasseur 2003 [1993]). However, what is more relevant to our story at hand, is that this new taxation system would and could not be introduced before Raffles had installed a committee to investigate what kind of indigenous property law already existed in Java. (Van den Doel and Schaepdrijver 1996: 18-20; Bastin 2004: 13, 29-31). This land revenue committee, headed by lieutenant Colin MacKenzie, collected besides a huge amount of Javanese artefacts, costumes, maps, drawings, etc. a large number of Javanese texts.

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<sup>30</sup> In 1811 John Joseph Stockdale had already published *Sketches civil and military of the island of Java*. It was a first attempt at a complete overview of all things Javanese. However, it lacked the systematic approach of Raffles. Its entry on Javanese Religion is an *ad verbatim* repetition of Stavorinus' description (Stockdale 1812 [1811]: 235-42).

Some of these texts from the MacKenzie collection were later used by Raffles for his *History*. Perhaps most notable amongst these was the work entitled “The History of Java” by the Dutchman J.A. van Middelkoop. It served as the basic framework for the two chapters dealing with the history of Java -history in the modern sense of the word. Jacob Albert van Middelkoop, who since his arrival in 1793 had served under Dutch and British rule, had already attempted to write a history of Java. It was drawn from different sources: personal researches, old manuscripts, and the “... relations of ingenious and creditable persons whose knowledge was founded upon tradition, and from the most part derived from the ancient *Patongs* or *Wayangs* of which the Javanese history is composed” (Weatherbee 1978: 73-74). Van Middelkoop’s history is thus an amalgam and one which assumes an increasingly Dutch vantage point from the middle of the 17th century onwards<sup>31</sup>. Besides van Middelkoop’s contribution, there is that of the Dutch surveyor, Major H.C. Cornelius who had supplied plans and drawings of temples in central Java. Then there are Captain George P. Baker’s detailed studies of the Borobudur and Prambanan temple complexes, and Nicolaus Engelhard’s drawings of sculptures around Semarang. And the list goes on. Raffles also managed to obtain the collaboration of distinguished Javanese gentlemen such as the *Bupati* of Torbaya (Semarang) Kiai Adipati Sura Adimanggala and the *Panembahan* of Sumenap, Natakasuma. The first had translated several *Babad* (chronicle), the latter a number of ancient inscriptions (Bastin 2004: 13, 29-31). These examples illustrate how *The History of Java* is a synthesis of reports and materials prepared and assembled by others, i.e. by collaborators and predecessors who are not always openly and clearly credited. Moreover, it is a display of the continuity that runs back to the VOC period and eventually to the Portuguese era. The continuity shows how each successive period built upon the achievements of the former.

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<sup>31</sup> Weatherbee (1978) argues that Raffles used the “History of Java” by J.A. van Middelkoop for the basic structure of his text and not the texts purportedly given to him by the Adipati of Demak, nor the *Serat Kanda* as translated by N. Engelhard as had been previously argued by Brandes.

### 3.3. Raffles and the Batavian society: privileging philology

In the previous paragraphs we saw how, both politically and academically, Raffles built upon the achievements of his predecessors. Already during the Napoleonic interregnum governor-general Herman Willem Daendels (1807-1810) had made headway in introducing an enlightened, modern colonial government, founded on the pillars of a modern civil service, a centralised government, a modern jurisdiction based on indigenous codes of law, and a system of land rent. The implementation of the colonial project depended on the colonial administrators' knowledge of Java and the Javanese: the knowledge of their language, their history, their culture, their laws and of course their religion. Consequently, there is a striking continuity in the study of Java that runs from the Portuguese, through the VOC, to the British and then Dutch colonial era (Van Goor 2004: 29-66, 83-98). Each successive colonial power used the resources already accumulated by their predecessors. This goes as much for factories and fortifications as it does for knowledge about their colonial subjects.

Still, what the academic study of Java concerns, it is hard to overestimate the importance of Raffles' contributions. Not only is his *The History of Java* a landmark in the field of Javanology, he also actively stimulated the scholarly research of Java. For example, he revived *Het Bataviaasch Genootschap voor Kunsten en Wetenschappen* (the Batavian Society).

Founded in 1778 by Jacobus Radermacher, a high official of the VOC, the Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences was the first society of its kind in Asia, even predating the Asiatic Society by six years. It was the most important cultural and scholarly organisation of the Netherlands East Indies in the time of the VOC and during the colonial period (Zuiderweg 1991: 161-64; Groot 2009). Initially, its prime focus was on tackling problems concerning colonial society. Prior to Raffles's involvement in the Batavian Society the topics of interest ranged from geography, technology, agriculture, natural history, and to a lesser extent ethnology, tropical hygiene, history and literature. Surprisingly, with regard to the religion of the Javanese, we find nothing (Thé-Mulliner and Van der Veur 1973; Snelders 1979). Due to the death and departure of several of its prominent members in the decades preceding Raffles' arrival, the activities of the Batavian Society had declined and scholarly output had come to a standstill.



### **Javanese literature: preferred vantage point**

It was Raffles who resuscitated the society, by taking charge and setting the scholarly agenda. From that moment on, ethnographic descriptions featuring descriptions of the religion of the Javanese appeared more frequently, but especially the number of articles dealing with Javanese literature grew increasingly. As we saw, there had already been orientalists with an interest in Javanese literature before 1800, but it is Raffles and, perhaps even more so, Crawfurd who mark the true take-off of the scientific study of Javanese language and literature. The latter was, just like Raffles, a British civil servant of the first rank. He was appointed resident of Yogyakarta from 1811 until 1816 and although he worked under Raffles he opposed his land rent reforms. After Java had been returned to the Dutch, Crawfurd continued his career as diplomat in missions to Siam and Burma and as civil servant in Singapore where he was resident after Raffles. (Some argue that Crawfurd and not Raffles was the true founder of Singapore.) During his stay in Yogyakarta, Crawfurd studied the Javanese language and befriended Javanese aristocrats. He had already studied Malay language and culture in Penang before his arrival in Java. More so than Raffles he was a philologist and can be regarded as an early exponent of the idea that text provides a privileged access point for the study of other cultures (De Haan 1935: 526-29; Bastin 1954). Crawfurd thus resembles those late 18th century British orientalists such as Charles Wilkins, William Jones, and Henry Thomas Colebrooke who had ventured into the Indian literary traditions. Their translations and philological studies of Sanskrit texts had been of seminal importance to establishing a European understanding of the Indian traditions that were to become known as Hinduism and Buddhism (Schwab 1984: 51-81; Clark 1997: 75-92; King 1999: 130 in Aljunied 2005b: 14).

Raffles shared this interest in oriental languages and literature. In his inaugural speech as president of the Batavian Society, Raffles determined two focal points for future scientific research of Java. Firstly, he stressed the importance of ethnological research in areas outside Java that did not overlap with those the (British) Asiatic Society was already researching. Secondly, and more importantly, he stressed philology (Groot 2009: 167ff.). The study of Javanese language and especially of Javanese texts was thought to be the perfect entry point into the history, the thought, the customs, laws and institutions of the Javanese:

“Without a thorough *knowledge of this language* [Javanese], it is impossible to form any *accurate idea of the modes of thinking or acting* among the people of this country. *Much valuable information may be expected to be found in their books*, and when they are more generally known, an attempt may be made to develop the early history of the Island, which, with the exception of some leading facts, remains anterior to the introduction of Mahomedanism, involved in obscurity and fable.” (Raffles 1814: 13-14; italics mine)

This conviction that Javanese texts are essential to the understanding of the Javanese heart and mind, underlies the scholarly output of virtually all orientalists. Javanese literature was and still is considered the privileged access point to the culture of the Javanese. However, the study of Javanese culture and religion via Javanese literature only really took off in the second half of the 19th century and reached full maturity in the 20th century. The first half of the 19th century, then, sees the publication of the first “scientific” dictionaries and grammars of the Javanese language by people such as Gericke, T.J. Roorda, Winter, and Cornets de Groot. By doing so they paved the way for locating, translating, analysing, and discussing the Javanese literary traditions. Consequently, the early orientalists of this chapter put the study of Javanese texts firmly on the academic agenda, but their conceptualisation of Javanese religion owes more to received wisdom than to textual analysis.

#### 3.4. Hinduism and the post-colonial argument

As we shall see in the paragraphs below, Crawfurd and Raffles consider the religion of the Javanese to be Islam, however in a modified version. Islam in Java, they claim, has been changed so as to suit the specific Javanese situation. More precisely, the precepts of Islam have been mixed with native customs and laws from Hinduism. Before we look at their descriptions of Islam in Java in more detail, we will briefly consider their treatment of Hinduism in Java.

Both Crawfurd and Raffles look upon Javanese antiquities as offering a view upon the previous religion of the Javanese. After all:

“An account of the antiquities of Java is also an account of its ancient religion, for every ancient monument of the island has

been dedicated to the favourite subject of superstitions, and hardly a vestige is found of any architectural remains constructed for purposes of convenience or utility.” (Crawfurd 1820, Vol. 2: 194-95)

It is from these antiquities, from ruins and inscriptions, that the orientalists started to puzzle together the history of Java’s ancient religion. Gradually, the findings from this domain would be substantiated by discoveries from Javanese literature, and vice versa. Crawfurd calls the ancient Javanese writings that confirm his deductions drawn from antiquities “collateral evidence” (ibid.: 219).

By looking at how much space they devote to it, we get an idea of the importance Raffles and Crawfurd attach to the religion of the Javanese. Of the 800 pages Raffles’ *The History of Java* consists of, the chapter that is dedicated to religion counts 68 pages. Crawfurd’s *History* counts about 1700 pages and spends about 55 pages on the religion of Java. What is, however, interesting is that both dedicate decisively more space to the ancient religion of the Javanese than to the contemporary Javanese religion. In Raffles, of these 68 pages 63 are spent on the descriptions of antiquities, that is descriptions of the *Prambanan* remains (a Hindu temple complex in Central Java), which leaves just about 5 pages to contemporary Javanese religion. Crawfurd spends a 42 odd pages on the subject of “The ancient religion of the Indian Islander” -which is in fact also a discussion of Hindu and Buddhist antiquities- and just 13 pages on “The character of Mohamedanism in the Indian Archipelago”.

Why would these authors dedicate more space to the previous instead of to the contemporary Javanese religion? It is tempting to argue that they were unsympathetic towards Islam and actually preferred Hinduism and Buddhism and therefore as a result spent more time on the subject of their affection than on the subject of their discontent. The result, one could be tempted to argue, is a specific kind of misrepresentation: a description of a benevolent Hinduism in a binary opposition with a dangerous Islam (e.g. Aljunied 2005a and 2005b). One of the problems with this type of post-colonial argument is that it fails to show a logically necessary connection between the scrutinised misrepresentation and the objective it supposedly serves, *in casu* colonial hegemony. In other words, it fails to explain the particularities of the misrepresentation at hand. How does the presence of a colonial power structure explain the specific way

Islam in Java is misrepresented -e.g. as dangerous, as nominal, as syncretist?

It is not sufficient to point out that a negative representation of Javanese Islam was used to advance certain colonial policies. Post-colonial criticism often points to the way colonial rule was justified as a means to uplift the still primitive Javanese. The low level of Javanese civilisation being argued on the basis of their syncretist religion. Although such arguments have indeed been furthered by colonial rulers and orientalists alike, they do not explain the actual emergence of the concept of Javanese Islam. Crawfurd, for example, represented Islam in Java in a far more positive way while serving the same cause as Raffles: colonial hegemony. As we shall see in chapter six, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje argued vehemently against the conceptualisation of a syncretist Javanese Islam, but also was a staunch advocate of the association theory<sup>32</sup>. Therefore, explaining the origin of a negative representation of Javanese Islam simply on the basis of orientalist scholarship in service of colonial policy is not sufficient. For now, it suffices to note that minimally this kind of argument is by no means conclusive. We will return to the post-colonial argument later on.

An alternative explanation for the seemingly disproportionate amount of space devoted to the ancient religion of the Javanese could simply be the novelty of it. After all, Hinduism and Buddhism had only recently been 'discovered'. The term Hinduism had been coined only as late as 1787 by Charles Grant (Oddie 2010: 45). Likewise, the term Buddhism only came in vogue in the last decades of the 18th century and in the beginning of the 19th century it was still very unclear what this Buddhism actually was. Therefore, during the first decades of the 19th century these concepts were still just gaining currency. The conceptualisation of Buddhism as a kind of reformation of Hinduism -very much analogous to the relation between Catholicism and Protestantism- only received its standardised form in the second half of the 19th century (Almond 1988: 7-32). It is therefore fitting that the first ever systematic description of the ancient Hindu temple complex of Prambanan received this much attention in Raffles' work. Similarly, Crawfurd goes to great lengths to

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<sup>32</sup> The association theory held it that the indigenous Javanese population (first of all the elite) would be able to elevate itself by receiving a Western education and by 'associating' with Western intellectuals.

discuss all known temples, statues and inscriptions found across the whole of Java. Completely in line with the encyclopaedic character of the first orientalist ventures, he divides them into different classes, allowing him to distinguish between genuine and declining forms of worship (Crawfurd 1820, Vol. 2: 207). In his view, Hinduism in Java was degenerated, because the Javanese had failed to adopt Hinduism in its original and thus pure form. They had, on the contrary, modified Hinduism. This argument, whether correct or not, shows that the negative evaluation of religions other than Christianity by colonial orientalists is not restricted to Islam *vis-à-vis* Hinduism. Here then is another reason to question the above post-colonial argument. This focus on the pure (i.e. genuine) or corrupted (i.e. declining) character of a religion is actually a recurring theme throughout the research on Java during the 19th and 20th century. It reflects a Western preoccupation with the doctrinal purity of religions, which, as we will see in later chapters, is highly relevant to the conceptualisation of Javanese Islam as a syncretist religion.

In summary then, it seems that Raffles and Crawfurd, in their emphasis on the ancient rather than on the present religion of the Javanese, were much more motivated by scholarly enthusiasm than by a political agenda<sup>33</sup>.

If Raffles and Crawfurd refer to the ancient religions of Java as Hinduism and Buddhism, then how do they describe the present religion? To both it is an almost self-evident truth that the Javanese are Muslim. However, according to both, the Javanese are superficial Muslims, who have modified Islam, and mixed Islamic laws with native customs and Hindu laws.

### 3.5. Familiar themes: rehashing the same structures

In the previous chapter I have delineated four themes that recur in each generation of descriptions of Javanese religion. While the basic topics remain the same, more detail is added to them, making the original

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<sup>33</sup> The proximity of philology and antiquarianism has been well established. E.g. Bauman and Briggs discuss it with regard to the study of folklore in the 17th and 18th century (2003: 70-127). The focus of Raffles and Crawfurd at the beginning of the 19th century seems to be in line with the scholarship of the period. I thank Prof. Arps for bringing this to my attention.

themes appear more robust in each consecutive phase. Moreover, these themes are usually featured as part of an argument, and these arguments become more elaborate and sophisticated. Consequently, by being rehashed time and again, these familiar themes became the stock-in-trade of the standard textbook story on Javanese Islam.

### 3.5.1. Proof of being Muslim: the practice of certain Islamic precepts

There is no doubt to Crawford and Raffles that the Javanese are Muslim. The reason for this certainty is that the Javanese observe a number of precepts of Islam. Both orientalist list a number of such precepts: the Javanese are circumcised, they pay *zakat* (alms giving), some perform the *Haji*. Moreover, they are married and buried in the Islamic fashion, they hold a number of Islamic festivals, and so on. All these practices prove that the Javanese are indeed Muslim (Raffles 1817, Vol. 1: 117, Vol. 2: 2, 4; Crawford 1820, Vol. 1: 85-105, Vol. 2: 259-61). Even though neither of the two is an expert on Islam, they seem to know more about this religion than the authors of the travel reports from previous centuries. Still, Raffles and Crawford make similar observations, and draw the same conclusion. Therefore, the first familiar theme remains the same: the Javanese are Muslim because they practice certain precepts from Islam.

### 3.5.2. Java's quick conversion to Islam

The second theme, the quick Javanese conversion to Islam, is also a topic of great interest to the early orientalists. Raffles actually begins his discussion of the religion of the Javanese by pointing out that at the end of the 14th century Mohammedan "missionaries" set foot on Javanese soil. Around the year 1475 the "Mohamedan religion" became the established faith of the country when the Hindu empire of Majapahit was overthrown (Raffles 1817, Vol. 2: 1). As a result:

"... with the exception of an inconsiderable number in some of the interior and mountainous tracts, the whole island appears to have been converted to Mahomedanism in the course of the sixteenth century, or at least at the period of the establishment of the Dutch at Batavia in 1620." (ibid.: 2)

Crawfurd as well associates the moment that Java converted to Islam with the moment when Majapahit was conquered. He pinpoints 1478 as the year of conversion (Crawfurd 1820 Vol. 2: 312). He explains the subsequent rapid advent of Islam by claiming, *inter alia*, that Hinduism did not have a strong hold on the minds of the Javanese:

“All that is important in the history of the introduction of Mahomedanism is told in a few words. The Mahomedans, in the course of several ages, had accumulated in considerable numbers. Many of them were persons who had seen the manners of other nations: all were superior in intelligence to the natives, and were capable of acting in combination for a great end; - they were actuated by a religious zeal, and, at length found an ambitious, persevering, and able leader. The aboriginal barbarians of Java, less active and civilized, with *a religion which never laid a strong hold of the imagination*, and, at the moment, as is proved in another place, for a long time on the decline, or unsupported by an active priesthood, were no match, notwithstanding their numbers, for the zeal and energy of their adversaries. The throne and government being subverted, and the leaders adopting the new religion, the progress of conversion among a people who, at this moment, would almost adopt a new religion on the authority of a royal mandate or proclamation, was necessarily rapid. (ibid.: 313-14; italics mine)

Two things attract the attention in this quote. Firstly, it contains an obvious positive evaluation of Islam *vis-à-vis* Hinduism. After all, Muslims are portrayed as more active, more civilised, and displaying a superior intelligence over their barbarian, Hindu counterparts. This is one of those instances that reveals how orientalist did not just enthuse about Java’s Hindu-Buddhist past to the detriment of the Islamic present -quite to the contrary. Secondly, Crawfurd’s explanation of the rapid conversion of the Javanese is bizarre. It rests partly on two claims: on the one hand the Islamic missionaries were very zealous; on the other hand, Hinduism did not have a strong hold on the Javanese. In what follows, however, we shall see that Crawfurd also claims the opposite of this: Islam in Java is very tolerant, because the missionaries were of a “temperate zeal”. Moreover, the Javanese still hold to their ancient institutions -amongst which Hinduism- in spite of their being Muslim. This obviously implies that Hinduism does have a strong hold on the Javanese mind. Nevertheless, regardless of Crawfurd’s rickety explanation, it

is clear that the smooth (i.e. the relative absence of violence) and quick conversion of the Javanese to Islam is a topic of continuing interest. Moreover, it is one that is not easily explained. In each step of the conceptual genealogy we come across this observation and a concomitant attempt at explanation.

### 3.5.3. Superficial Islam and absence of true belief

According to Raffles and Crawfurd, the Javanese are not true believers, but are only Muslim on the surface -i.e. the third familiar theme. Raffles holds that:

“The Mahomedan religion, as it at present exists on Java, seems only to have penetrated the surface, and to have taken but little root in the heart of the Javans.” (Raffles 1817, Vol. 2: 5)

Raffles offers a number of examples of the slight hold of Islam on the Javanese: the lack of hatred towards the Europeans as infidels, which in another instance he calls tolerance; the ease with which the Javanese supposedly reconvert to Hinduism; and -an absolute classic- their consumption of alcohol. In Raffles’ eyes the Javanese only “observe some of the outward forms of the worship and observances” of Islam” (ibid.: 2).

Crawfurd makes a similar argument. In his eyes all the inhabitants of the Indonesian archipelago are “nominally of the orthodox faith” (Crawfurd 1820, Vol. 2: 259). The superficial faith of the Javanese is demonstrated by their laxity in and ignorance of their own religious principles and practices. To illustrate the laxity, he lists the Islamic precepts the Javanese do and do not adhere to. Furthermore, he draws examples from his own experience as Resident of Yogyakarta and from entertaining close relationships with Javanese aristocrats. Typically, Crawfurd mentions the reluctance to abstain from alcohol and the lack of zeal when it comes to fasting and praying. He also relates how a peasant was unaware of who Mohammed was (in the end he claimed it was the name of the village priest) and how a band of labourers makes fun of the Islamic prayers by mimicking the way an acquainted priest preaches from the *Qur’an*. Even the sultan made light of his religious obligations, such as praying, by jokingly telling Crawfurd that his mother had gone to the mosque to pray



for herself and him too. To Crawfurd such examples paint the true picture of the popular feeling on religion and they also illustrate the absence of intolerance (ibid.: 261-69).

As we have seen, even today, the idea of a superficial or nominal Islam is still an intricate part of the textbook story on Javanese religion. When it comes to explanations, though, there is not much to find in the descriptions of Raffles and Crawfurd. According to the latter, the superficiality of Islam in Java is the result of its isolation through the “commercial jealousy” of the Dutch from foreign Mohammedans (Arabs in particular), who would otherwise have promoted stricter observance of Islam (ibid.: 261).

#### 3.5.4. The Javanese adhere to practices from different beliefs

In the eyes of Raffles and Crawfurd the Javanese are not only superficially Muslim, they also modified Islam. They did so especially with regard to jurisprudence -which perhaps should not surprise us given the orientalist’s preoccupation with locating the indigenous laws of the Javanese. Both orientalists describe this modification in terms of a mixture of native customs with Islamic and Hindu laws. In Raffles’ words:

“The written law of the country, according to which justice is administered and the courts are regulated is that of the *Koran*, as *modified by custom and usage*. The Javans have now been converted to the Mahomedan religion about three centuries and a half, dating from the destruction of the Hindu kingdom of Majapahit, in the year 1400 of the Javan æra. Of all the nations who have adopted that creed, they are among the most recent converts; and it may be safely added, that few others are so *little acquainted with its doctrines, and partake so little of its zeal and intolerance*. The consequence is, that although the Mahomedan law be in some instances followed, and it be considered a point of honour to profess an adherence to it, *it has not entirely superseded the ancient superstitions and local customs of the country*.” (Raffles 1817, Vol. 1: 309: italics mine)

To Crawfurd, as well, the laws of the Javanese consist “of a commixture of native customs and of Hindu and Mahomedan jurisprudence” (Crawfurd 1820, Vol. 3: 76). A similar thought is expressed in Raffles’ description of the religion and laws of the Javanese:

“The natives are still devotedly attached to their ancient institutions, and though they have long ceased to respect the temples and idols of a former worship, *they still retain a high respect for the laws, usages, and national observances which prevailed before the introduction of Mahomedanism* (...) it may be fairly stated, that the Javans in general, while they believe in one supreme God, and that Mahomed was his Prophet, and observe some of the outward forms of the worship and observances, are little acquainted with the doctrines of that religion, and are the least bigoted of its followers (...) Property usually descends according to the Mahomedan law; but in other cases, the Mahomedan code, as adopted by the Javans, is *strangely blended with the more ancient institutions of the country*” (Raffles 1817, Vol. 2: 2; italics mine)

Summarising then, the fourth familiar theme also appears in the accounts of both Crawford and Raffles: the religion of the Javanese is, although Islam by name, a mixture of beliefs and practices from different religions. They offer three explanations for this phenomenon. Firstly, Crawford and Raffles seem to suggest that the Javanese do not know their own religion, at least not its doctrines. Secondly, the modifications and mixtures are a result of the still primitive state of Javanese society. Neither the Hindu laws nor those from Islam could have been rigidly adopted in Java, because:

“... laws framed for a populous country, in which the odious institution of the castes was rigidly established, or for the shepherds of the arid and sterile plains of Arabia, could not be transferred, *without modification*, to the simple, rude, and scanty population of the verdant and luxuriant islands of the equator.” (Crawford 1820, Vol. 3: 76; italics mine)

Thirdly, the modifications are explained as a result of the way Islam gained stronghold in Java by, i.e. grafting itself on the ancient Hindu institutions:

“In most of the Mahomedan institutions of the Javanese, we discover marks of Hinduism. *The institutions of the latter have in reality been rather modified and built upon than destroyed*, and in viewing them, we cannot withhold the tribute of our applause to the discreet and artful conduct of the first Mahomedan teachers, whose temperate zeal is always marked by a politic and wise forbearance.” (Crawford 1820, Vol. 2: 266; italics mine)

For example, Javanese priests, although they are Muslim, resemble more the Hindu priests:

“The present priests of Java are the *successors in office, and almost in duty, to the priest and astrologer of the Hindu village* (...) [and] are a peaceful, contented, and respectable portion of the Javanese peasantry, living in terms of perfect equality with the ordinary cultivators.” (ibid.: 266; italics mine)

More evidence is found in the Javanese religious festivals: next to the two indubitably Islamic festivals of “*Id ul Fetre*” and “*Id ul Kurban*”, the Javanese keep two more. One is a relic of their “ancient superstitions” and is organised in honour of their ancestors. Another, “*Rabbi ul awal*”, commemorates the birth of the Prophet Mohammed, but is in all probability instituted to replace the Hindu festivals called “*Galungan*” and “*Kuningan*”. Crawford regards this as “a discreet concession made to the Javanese by the first Mahomedan missionaries” (ibid.: 262). Although he evaluates such a concession positively, it raises doubts to the truly Islamic character of these festivals, since “Every part of the ceremony puts Mahomedan decorum at defiance” (ibid.: 263).

### 3.6. Conceptual context and structuring concepts

There is a conceptual context within which it made sense to describe Javanese religion in the above terms. I shall sketch it, based on the two interconnected themes it features.

Firstly, there is the theme of degeneration. As we saw, according to Raffles and Crawford, the history of Javanese religion was one of degeneration. After all, the Javanese had not adopted Hinduism in a pure and unscathed state, they had modified it. This was manifest in the temples, and in the temple images and inscriptions found all over Java. There were, however, also indications that at some point the situation was remedied by a kind of reformation:

“From all this it will perhaps be fair to infer, that the Hinduism of Java was the worship of Siwa and Durga of the Linga and Yoni united to Buddhism; and I think we may go the length of concluding, that it was a *reformation* of the bloody and indecent worship of Siwa, brought about by sages or philosophers, by

persons, in short, of more kindly affections than the rest of their countrymen, and perhaps to keep pace with some start in civilization in the country where it had its origin.“ (ibid.: 218-19; italics mine)

To Crawfurd the Hinduism on Java was an instance of the Hinduism as reformed by Buddha (ibid.: 222). The “Hindu sect of Siwa” was considered a corruption or degeneration of a pure and genuine Hinduism. The “Hindu sect of Budha” was a reaction against and reformation of this degeneration. Crawfurd, thus, thinks of Buddhism as a reformation of Hinduism, very much similar to the way Protestantism was a reformation of Catholicism. Almond discusses how this idea of reformation, and the concomitant image of Buddha as the Luther of Hinduism, became a constitutive element in the Victorian conceptualisation of Buddhism (Almond 1988: 73 ff.). Crawfurd was therefore clearly at the forefront of orientalist research with these descriptions of Hinduism and Buddhism in Java. The theme of degeneration and reformation shows how, to the West, Java’s religious history was modelled after the European religious history. As we will see, besides its religious history, Javanese religion itself was also made sense of by turning it into a variant of a European model.

The second theme is that of an evolutionary ladder on which different cultures occupy different rungs. This theme is related to the former. After all, according to these descriptions, the reason for modifying Hinduism and Islam is that the Javanese lack the mental capabilities to truly understand these religions. Since their society is still very primitive, the story goes, the Javanese are not able to handle abstract ideas. They were not evolved enough “to relish the laborious subtleties, and the troublesome ceremonies of the Hindu religion and ritual“ (Crawfurd 1820, Vol. 2.: 231-32). They are only capable of personifying objects of nature instead. As a result of this “rude state of society”:

“...the common objects of nature were personified, and the woods, the waters, and the air, were peopled with deities, the objects of fear, or adoration, or both, with the Javanese. To this day, their belief in these local deities is hardly diminished, after the admission of the superstitions of two foreign religions [viz. Hinduism and Islam], such is the measure of their credulity.” (ibid.: 230)

Each different stage of civilisational evolution can be linked to particular religions. The lowest rung on the evolutionary ladder is occupied by those people who adhere to animism and ancestor worship. Their minds are not very evolved and they can only manage to anthropomorphise elements of nature or seek help from deceased relatives. One rung higher up is occupied by polytheists, such as the Hindus, who are capable of some abstract thought. They associate different qualities with different gods. The highest rung is that of the monotheists, whose conception of one all-powerful god is supposedly superior to all the rest.

Some comments with regard to this framework. Firstly, this evolutionary scheme has dominated social sciences and religious studies for a long time, and perhaps to some extent still does. When Crawfurd calls the Javanese “semibarbarians” we should not just dismiss this as “fiercely judgemental” (see Ricklefs 2007: 10-11). After all, within this evolutionary scheme it made perfect sense to speak of the Javanese as on a lower level of civilisation than the Europeans (but higher than e.g. the inhabitants of Borneo) and of their religion as a modified and degenerate one (cf. Crawfurd 1820 Vol. 2: 275-80; 1861a). This is not so much a question of being judgemental, but rather one of false scientific pretences. Secondly, there is a continuity linking this orientalist conceptual framework with those of the early travellers. To the latter, as we saw, the world was still very much a Biblical world, governed by an omnipotent God who had instilled religion in each man and nation. Post-enlightenment scholars, such as Raffles and Crawfurd, treated man as endowed with a natural ability or inclination to religion. That is, instead of appealing to a supernatural account for the origin of religion (i.e. God), an appeal is made to a natural cause. Often cited natural causes are man’s innate need for explanations (Why do we live? What is the meaning of life? etc.), man’s innate fear of the unknown (The existence of God or gods reduces fear), or a need to order chaotic experience into an ordered whole (see Balagangadhara 1994: 153-87). This stance is especially apparent in Crawfurd’s discussion of how different kinds of religion (more or less abstract) are suitable for different levels of civilisation:

“I need hardly add that the religious sentiment is peculiar to man. *It is, indeed, a necessary consequence of his power of contemplation, and accordingly we find it to exist in one form or another in every social condition; grovelling in the savage, sanguinary or intolerant in the barbarian,*

tolerant and enlightened only in the civilized man, and not, indeed, always even with him.” (Crawfurd 1861b: 355; italics mine)

For the purpose of this thesis, it suffices to point out that such ‘arguments’ have been proven riddled with logical fallacies and are actually quite unscientific. Therefore, it is safe to state that the early orientalists postulated the universality of religion just as the previous generation of observers had done.

As far as the structuring concepts are concerned, here too we find a clear continuity with the previous phase. As should be clear from the quotes drawn from Raffles and Crawfurd: the descriptions of Javanese religion are structured around the concepts of belief and practice. The first concept is expressed with terms such as ‘superstition’ and ‘doctrine’, the second with terms as ‘worship’ and ‘idolatry’. Only by speaking of Javanese religion in terms of the doctrines or beliefs, is it possible to speak of modifications, mixing, and degeneration. After all, the reason the Javanese modify Islam and mix it with other religions, is because they do not understand the Islamic doctrines in the first place. And only if there is a pure doctrine, can one also speak of degeneration.

Summarising, even though in the orientalist accounts the religion of the Javanese has become a separate topic of interest, and a lot of detail has been added to the descriptions of it, both the conceptual (or theoretical) framework and the structuring concepts have remained virtually the same. The only change of relevance is the substitution, or identification if you will, of ‘Heathenism’ with ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Buddhism’.

### 3.7. The legacy of Raffles and Crawfurd: orientalist descriptions of Javanese religion

The descriptions of religion in Java achieved a certain standardisation after Raffles and Crawfurd, as their renditions of the Javanese religious condition were being constantly reproduced both in the handbooks for Dutch civil service as in popular travel accounts. These texts then do not only testify to the huge influence of Raffles and Crawfurd, they also demonstrate the existence of a loop between the education of European colonials (mostly though not only *in patria*) and their experiences in the field. Their education about Java and the Javanese and their preparation

for their task in colonial service relied on scholarly accounts such as those by Crawfurd and Raffles. These accounts provided the elements, the concepts with which the colonial civil servants could structure their experiences once in the field. Their experiences in the field then in turn reinforced what they had learned from their textbooks. Eventually, their own descriptions would often be turned into new textbooks, thus continuing the said loop.

A case in point is P. P. Roorda van Eysinga, who had been a civil servant in the Dutch Indies, and mostly in Java, from 1819 until 1830. His extensive knowledge of (amongst others) Malay, Arabic and Javanese and his many experiences in the field had made him an expert on virtually all things Javanese. In 1836 he became professor at the Royal Military Academy in Breda. The courses he taught included the languages, lands and peoples of the East Indies (*Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde*) (Wap 1857). For this purpose he delivered, between 1841 and 1850, a voluminous handbook for his students -a typical orientalist encyclopaedic work. His rendering of religion in Java hinges on the same themes as Crawfurd's and Raffles':

“Although nowadays the Javanese call themselves Islamists, Hinduism has far from been erased with them. They regard the ancient moments with sacred respect, still make offerings in caves, on holy sites and grave-mounds, and hurry themselves to those theatrical performances that take their imagination back to the oldest centuries.” (Roorda van Eysinga 1850: 275)<sup>34</sup>

We find a similar example in Johannes Olivier, a teacher turned civil servant. In service of the Dutch Indies he was secretary, translator, head-teacher at a government school, and director of a publishing house during the first half of the 19th century. He was well-read and clearly familiar with the principal writings on Java, as he often refers to Crawfurd, Raffles and P.P. Roorda van Eysinga -the latter whom he was acquainted with. He was editor of the journal *De Oosterling* (The Easterner) which was dedicated to the dissipation of all knowledge concerning the Dutch

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<sup>34</sup> My translation of: “Ofschoon de Javanen zich thans Islamiten noemen, is het Hindoeïsmus bij hen op verre na nog niet uitgewischt. De Gedenkteekenen der oudheid beschouwen zij altijd met heiligen eerbied, offeren nog in grotten, op geheiligde plaatsen en graftepen, en ijlen met geestdrift naar die tooneelvertooningen, welke hunne verbeelding in de vroegste eeuwen terugvoeren.”

Indies (Heemskerk 1992: 159-160). His 1836 *Tafereelen en merkwaardigheden uit Oost-Indië* (Scenes and Curiosities from the East Indies) is a mixture of a travel account and a more scholarly introduction to Java. About the religion of the Javanese we find:

“Despite the fact that the Javanese (...) profess the Mohammedan teaching, it is with them still very much *mixed with Hindu concepts*, to the effect that they have taken over nothing of the Mohammedan intolerance.” (Olivier 1836: 91-92; italics mine)<sup>35</sup>

This sounds just like a quote from Raffles or Crawfurd. Another theme, that of the Javanese as a superficial Muslim, is featured in the second volume of the same book. The Javanese:

“... have only a *very superficial knowledge* of this teaching and most times content themselves with the observation of the *exterior* ceremonies and religious practices, like the circumcision, the ablutions, the yearly fast in the month Ramazan and other *exterior* customs. The concepts of the *Hindu religious doctrines are still so deeply rooted* with the Javanese that they are only half Mohamethan.” (Olivier 1838: 173-74; italics mine)<sup>36</sup>

The Javanese is thus Muslim only on the outside: his attachment to Islam is restricted to his behaviour. The Javanese mind, however, is still attached to Hinduism.

Between 1846 and 1857 Abraham Jacob van der Aa had compiled a 4 volume work on the Dutch possessions in the East Indies that enjoyed large popularity. Having never set foot on Javanese soil, all his information is drawn from sources such as: P.P. Roorda van Eysinga, W. von Humboldt, Raffles, Crawfurd and *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch Indië* (Journal

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<sup>35</sup> My translation of: “Hoezeer de Javanen (...) de mahomedaansche leer belijden, is deze bij hen nog altijd met zeer vele hindoesche begrippen vermengd, zoo dat zij van de mahomedaansche onverdraagzaamheid hoegenaamd niets hebben overgenomen.”

<sup>36</sup> My translation of: “(Wanneer men zegt, dat de Javanen, met uitzondering der niet zeer talrijke bedowi, algemeen de leer van den gewaanden Profet van Mekka hebben aangenomen, moet men daarbij voegen,) dat zij van deze leer slechts eene zeer oppervlakkige kennis hebben, en zich meestal vergenoegen met de waarneming der uiterlijke plegtigheden en godsdienstoefeningen, zoo als de besnijdenis, de abluïen, de jaarlijksche vaste in de maand Ramazan, en andere uiterlijke gebruiken. De begrippen van de Hindoesche leerstellingen zijn nog altijd bij de Javanen zoo diep geworteld, dat zij slechts ten halve Mahomedanen zijn:”



of the East Indies). And indeed his descriptions of Javanese religion have a familiar ring:

“Professing the faith of Mohammed has not elevated them above the superstitious prejudices and prescriptions of another religion; therefore they follow the aberrations of two religious systems.”  
(Van der Aa 1849: 48)<sup>37</sup>

A last example is that of Pfyffer zu Neueck, a Swiss officer enlisted in the Dutch Military. His *Scbetsen van het eiland Java...* (Sketches of the Island of Java...) enjoyed great popularity in its day. Originally published in German in 1829, it went through a number of reprints and was translated into French and Dutch. It reads as an introduction to Java as it describes the geographical setting of Java, its natural history, flora, fauna, and its population. Regarding the religion of the Javanese, Pfyffer zu Neueck also points out that the Javanese are only concerned with the practice of Islam as something exterior.

“The common people, that happily accept anything that pleases them as to the *exterior*, but that does not care about the essential value or about the purpose of an institution; that considers all the exterior acts and loses sight of or neglects the main point; that people are under the delusion that they comport themselves completely to the laws of Mohammed when they fast from six in the morning to six in the evening.” (Pfyffer zu Neueck 1838: 87; italics mine)<sup>38</sup>

Pfyffer zu Neueck relates this superficiality to the ancient religion of the Javanese:

“The Javanese (...) embrace Islam, but this does not prevent one from noticing a large number of customs that testify of a much greater antiquity and which are, despite the zeal of the Arab

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<sup>37</sup> My translation of: “Het belijden van de leer van Mohammed heeft hun niet verheven boven bijgeloovige vooroordeelen en voorschriften van eene andere godsdienst; de dwalingen van twee godsdienstige stelsels worden alzoo door hen nageleefd.”

<sup>38</sup> My translation of: “Het gemeene volk, hetwelk zoo gaarne alles aanneemt, wat uiterlijk hetzelfde treft, maar zich weinig laat gelegen zijn aan de wezenlijke Waarde of aan het doel eener instelling; hetwelk al de uiterlijke bedrijven in acht neemt, en de hoofdzaak uit het oog verliest of verwaarloost; dat volk waant, zich volkomen naar de wetten van Mohammed te gedragen, als het van zes ure des morgens tot zes ure des avonds vast.”

priests, maintained and conscientiously handed down from generation to generation. One finds traces of the original worship everywhere.” (ibid.: 89-90)<sup>39</sup>

Pfyffer zu Neueck, who seems to have been quite a religious person, actually has a very positive idea of the Javanese. His text is larded with small reflections on Javanese kindness and hospitality which he relates to the way the old religion still filters through. In his opinion the religion of Buddha (that is how he calls the ancient religion) stood on a morally higher level than Islam. Apparently, he also inscribed into the theme of degeneration (ibid.: 84-85). Still, according to Pfyffer zu Neueck, Divine Providence looks after all human beings, whether they pray to it as God or as Allah (ibid. 237). His biggest desire, therefore, was that the Javanese too would see the Light and that both Mohammedan and Christian would join as one family. This sentiment of universal conciliation (*alverzoening*) is shared with the Modern strand of the Protestant missionaries who are the central topic of our next chapter.

### 3.8. Conclusion

I have argued in the course of this chapter, that Raffles’ and Crawfurd’s renditions of Javanese religion form a link in a longer chain of descriptions. On the one hand, they use and reproduce material provided by other researchers and authors. This is very obvious in Raffles’ *History*, which is very much an amalgam of snippets from various sources. For example, although he identifies Hinduism as the previous religion of the Javanese when speaking of the moment of conversion, he does not integrate this insight into the rest of his text, but continues to speak of “ancient institutions”. Moreover, both Crawfurd and Raffles draw from the same conceptual reservoir as their predecessors. They make identical presuppositions -viz. universality of religion; religious practices express religious beliefs- and remain within an identical, though less obviously theological, conceptual framework. In the course of this dissertation we

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<sup>39</sup> My translation of: “De Javanen (...) omhelzen het Islamismus, doch dit belet niet, dat men bij hen eene menigte gebruiken opmerkt, die van eene veel hoogere oudheid getuigen, en die, ten spijt van den dweepzieken ijver der Arabische priesters, onderhouden en getrouwelijk van geslacht tot geslacht overgeleverd worden. Allerwege vindt men de sporen der oorspronkelijke Godsvereering..”

will come to identify this conceptual reservoir as a Western conceptual reservoir. Furthermore, they recount the same 'familiar themes', only adding detail and supplying explanations and arguments. The only real novelty Crawford and Raffles contribute to the existing conceptualisation is the identification of at least one of these previous religions as Hinduism. However, the structure of the concept remains the same: Javanese religion is a mixture of Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs and practices. On the other hand, both scholars have been hugely influential. Although their accounts lack sound theorising, they are nonetheless taken for truthful renditions of Javanese reality. A case in point are the swooping theoretical conjectures in the work of Crawford that have over the years become the object of rightful criticism. Still, his description of Islam in Java carried great authority and its impact is felt to this day.

Being in the vanguard of Javanese orientalism, Raffles and Crawford were perhaps more encyclopaedists than they were scholars developing ground-breaking theories. Their inventories and classifications are but one step in the continuing consolidation of the conceptualisation of Javanese religion. This is evidenced in how almost immediately after Raffles and Crawford virtually everybody starts speaking about the Hindu and Buddhist past of Java. A visit to a temple ruin results in the description of the Hindu and Buddhist statues. People start to see traces of Hindu doctrines in what a couple of decades ago was merely dubbed superstition. Their descriptions were copied into the numerous textbooks that served as a basis for the education of the Dutch military and civil servants to be dispatched to the Netherlands Indies. By consequence, these works laid out the lines along which they were able to make sense of their own experiences in Java. As we saw, the descriptions of subsequent scholars and amateurs continually echo the structuring concepts as fixed by Crawford and Raffles.

As I have repeatedly pointed out in the course of this chapter, the way the orientalists made sense of Javanese religion is not a function of the colonial power structure. After all, there is no direct causal relationship between this power structure and the way Javanese religion was misrepresented. Neither the rise to dominance and hegemony of the VOC nor that of the Netherlands Indies can explain that Javanese religion is represented specifically as a mix of Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs and practices, nor as superficial, as syncretist, etc. The focus on the structuring

concepts and conceptual structure, however, seems to indicate that the origin of the misrepresentation actually lies in the conceptual reservoir of those who describe Javanese religion. In the following chapters we will further explore this suggestion, as we look for an alternative explanation.

Raffles and Crawford's efforts were part of the Western quest for the Javanese codes of law, Java's history, poetry, and religious literature. As we saw, the first generation of orientalists mostly provided dictionaries, grammars and the appropriate categories to divide and analyse Javanese 'literature'. With this they laid the groundwork for the 'textual foundation' of Javanese religion. We will touch upon the impact of the philological approach on the conceptualisation of religion in Java later on. Before that, we first have to devote our attention to the achievements of the men in the field, Java's first ethnographers: the Protestant missionaries.





## 4. Missionaries as the first ethnographers: the birth of Javanism and Javanese Islam

When the Dutch state took over the VOC in 1796, it did not substantially change the VOC's strict policies of control and it took the government until 1870 to relax the regulations for access to and travels through Java (Van Goor 2004: 101). With the influx of more private individuals, more information concerning the archipelago became available. Consequently, while up to this time the Western understanding of Islam in Java might appear somewhat abstract and detached, this changes from the second half of the 19th century onwards, as gradually more and more ethnographic descriptions of Javanese people are generated and distributed. This process was spearheaded by Dutch Protestant missionaries, who, under very strict conditions, were allowed to deploy their activities in Java from ca. 1850s onwards. They were in fact the first ethnographers of Javanese *desa-* and *kampung-*life. After having received their missionary training in the Netherlands, they settled in Javanese villages for years on end. In their capacity as missionaries they tried to make sense of the religious condition of the Javanese. After all, in order to lead the Javanese to the true religion, the Javanese false beliefs had to be identified first. The results of their efforts, of what we can regard as years of fieldwork, have been hugely influential for the current understanding of religion in Java. As we will see, during this period and amongst these Protestant missionaries, the concept of 'Javanese Islam' and its counterpart 'Javanism' see the light of day. Before we turn our attention to their descriptions of Javanese religion, I will sketch the historical context of missionary activity in Java, and briefly touch upon their theological positions and missionary training.

### 4.1. Conversion in Java: a late start

A detailed overview of the history of Christianity in the Indonesian archipelago and in Java in particular is not within the ambit of this study. In fact, both the history of the Christian mission as well as the history of

the Protestant and Catholic church in Java have already been amply studied and analysed (see e.g. Mooij 1923; Boetzelaer 1947; Boneschansker 1987; Boone 1997; Van den End 1997a; Steenbrink and Aritonang 2008). In this chapter we will focus merely on certain facets of the Protestant mission in Java, and more particularly in East Java, during the second half of the 19th century.

It seems odd at first sight that we do not find any detailed descriptions of religion in Java from the hands of missionaries or clergy before the 1850s. After all, Protestant ministers such as Abraham Rogerius (1609-1649), Philippus Baldaeus (1632-1672), and François Valentijn (1666-1727) did contribute greatly to the knowledge of what later became known as Hinduism. Although each of these men had spent quite some time in Java, their accounts do not give much insight into the religion of the island. For example, as we saw, Valentijn merely depicted the Javanese as superstitious Mohammedans. However, he did discuss the religion of the Ambonese in considerable detail (Huigen 2010). Even the famous minister Justus Heurnius (1587-1652), who had been very keen to start proselytisation amongst the natives and Chinese around Batavia, but had been sent off to Maluku instead, has not left us with any descriptions of the religion of the Javanese (Callenbach 1897: 104-11).

This absence is at least partly explained by the fact that in Java the mission was off to a late start, certainly if compared to other parts of the archipelago, such as Maluku, or other colonial territories, such as the British. The reason lies in the peculiarities of Java's colonial history. Until it dissolved into the Netherlands Indies, it had been the responsibility of the VOC to spread the Christian faith in the Indonesian archipelago. As stated in the second octroi of 1623, the VOC had to maintain the Protestant Church, spread the true faith, and eliminate idolatry and false religion amongst the indigenous peoples. This implied that both the church, as well as the mission, were under direct control of the VOC. Why then was there no proselytisation on Java, but all the more on e.g. the Maluku Islands? Of course, many Malukans had already been converted to Catholicism by the Portuguese. Catholicism was seen as a possible reason of 'collaboration' with the Portuguese enemy and thus conversion to Protestantism was a strategy to possibly prevent this. Furthermore, in this part of the archipelago Islam hadn't made as much advent as it had in other islands. Malukans were therefore thought to be



easier to convert than, say, the Muslims of Java. The main reasons, however, not to promote proselytisation on Java seem to have been the VOC's policy of non-interference and a lack of finances. As the VOC preferred to leave the day-to-day governance of Java as much as possible to the local authorities, a policy of active proselytisation might have been disruptive of social order and therefore in conflict with that. Furthermore, the history of the *Indische Kerk* (The Church of the Netherlands Indies) in Java reads as a chain of consecutive pleas for more and better educated priests and clergy, and for decent Malay and Javanese translations of the Gospel and formularies -in other words for more funding. The VOC, however, hardly even managed to provide in the needs of its own congregations in the various Javanese colonial cities such as Bantam, Batavia, Semarang and Surabaya. Consequently, lack of funds and concomitant lack of personnel seem to have been the major causes to relinquish proper proselytisation on Java (Boetzelaer 1947; Niemeijer 1996).

This situation changed after the separation of church and state in 1795 had opened the way for the eventual deployment of 'free' missionary activities in the Dutch colonies. In 1797 the first completely Dutch missionary society was founded, the *Nederlandsch Zendeling Genootschap* or NZG (Dutch Missionary Society). Although conceived to operate globally, it would become particularly active in the Netherlands Indies. However, travelling into and about Java was restricted and controlled. Furthermore, the colonial authorities feared to unsettle the sensitivities of the Javanese Muslims. Especially after the Diponegara War from 1825 until 1830, which had displayed elements of an Islamic upsurge towards the infidel colonial oppressor. Consequently, the influx of missionaries had been prohibited. The three missionaries from the NZG -J.C. Supper, G.W. Brückner, and J. Kam- who had managed to enter Java as early as 1814, were therefore a notable exception. They had done so under the flag of the London Missionary Society, while Java was still under British rule. Soon enough though, these three pioneering missionaries were taken up in the *Indische Kerk* and were expected in the first place to take care of the existing Dutch Protestant congregations. For this purpose Supper stayed in Batavia, Brückner was stationed in Semarang and Kam was placed in Ambon (after a brief stay in Surabaya). Therefore, only a modest part of their energy could be spent on spreading the Gospel. Of these three, Gottlob Brückner is the most relevant to our story. Amongst

his missionary achievements we can count a Javanese translation of the New Testament in 1823. He also effectuated the first basic Javanese grammar and was the first to develop a Javanese typeset (Uhlenbeck 1964: 44, 53; Van der Molen 2000). Besides that, he managed some colportage in villages around Semarang and later Salatiga (see e.g. *B&B* 1820: 151-53; 1823: 56-59; 1824: 60-61; 1826: 30-34). With the exception of these three missionaries, it took the NZG about 50 years to start its proselytising activities in Java.

Only after the discovery of a 'home-grown' community of Javanese Christians in East Java, did the government of the Netherlands Indies change its policy concerning proselytisation. This community, led by the Indo-European Coenraad Laurens Coolen (1773/1785-1873), was considered living proof that conversion to Christianity need not result in religious upheaval on the part of the Javanese Muslims (Van Akkeren 1970: 54-91). Especially a report of a 1847 inspection trip of the realisations of the Christian communities in the Netherlands Indies by L.J. van Rhijn seems to have swayed the Dutch colonial authorities to open Java -albeit under tough constrictions, and only partially- to the missionaries. The first one to be appointed to East Java was J.E. Jellesma who had accompanied van Rhijn on his inspection trip (Van Rhijn 1851; Hiebink 1855: 89; Schuh 1864: 77). Thus, from 1848 onwards, Protestant Missionaries were finally officially allowed to spread the Gospel among the Javanese.

#### 4.2. The NZG: some theological background

Any missionary activity depends essentially upon theology: upon a conception of the ideal Christian and the idea of how to bring people to that ideal Christianity. That is to say, the theological stance of the missionaries discussed in this chapter is highly relevant to the way they perceived both their task in Java and the religious condition of the Javanese. Originally, the NZG had been set up as an interdenominational society, bringing together Reformed, Remonstrant and Mennonite Protestants, with the aim of optimising human and financial resources (Boneschanker 1987). However, by the end of the 1830s a theological schism running through Dutch Protestant theology had also started to divide the

NZG. Those pertaining to the enlightened, humanist Groninger theology came to alienate those pertaining to the more orthodox, pietist Réveil (Boneschansker 1987; Boone 1997: 19-22). The historical development of this schism and its repercussions on the Protestant mission has been recounted elsewhere (e.g. Roessingh 1914, Boone 1997). Here, I will merely lift out a couple of themes relevant to the genealogy at hand. We will pick these up again later when we discuss the way the missionaries central to this chapter reflected upon their experiences in Java.

The Groninger theology had, in the footsteps of Schleiermacher, located the essence and foundation of religion in the feeling of total dependence of the individual on God. Since each individual person is thought capable of this feeling, of this experience of religiosity, different religions are nothing more than different reactions to that experience. As God was thought to reveal Himself in nature and history, it is mankind's obligation to study that nature and history. Reason, and the natural sciences, had to be employed to disclose the revelation of God. Added to that was the conviction that, through history, God had been educating mankind to resemble Jesus. The existence of the Old and New Testament, and specifically the latter following the former, were considered proof of this. Therefore, conversion was thought of as a cognitive process, which is gradual. In this process, one takes Jesus as an example to become a civilised human being. It seems that the missionary Jellesma was inclined to the Groninger theology (De Jong 1997).

The Réveil, on the other hand, had wanted to restore the Reformed confession and the rules governing Church life. Consequently, it firmly held to a contradistinction between belief and reason (i.e. science). Becoming a Christian was possible only by taking refuge to Christ. Consequently, conversion is not so much a cognitive and gradual process as it is a matter of grace. The differences between these two, mutually exclusive, stances were reflected in the approaches towards missionary activity (Van den End 1997b: 2). As the influence of the Groninger theology became stronger in the NZG, emphasis was increasingly put on education and schooling. Eventually, the more traditional, orthodox faction would leave the NZG in the late 1840s (ibid.: 6-8). From it emerged new missionary societies such as the *Doopsgezinde Vereniging tot Bevordering der Evangelieverbreiding in de Nederlandsche Overzeesche Bezittingen* (Mennonite Society for the Promotion of the Evangelisation of the Overseas Possessions) of

which the mennonite missionary Pieter Jansz, who we will come across later on, was a member.

Roessingh interprets these developments in Dutch Protestant theology from ca. 1800 onwards as different phases in the never-ending battle between Christianity and culture, or, more specifically, between the sharply defined dogmas of Reformed Protestantism and the newly acquired insights from the natural sciences. After all, the Enlightenment had raised serious doubts about certain supra-rational Christian standpoints, such as the possibilities of miracles, Christ being the son of God, etc. Thus, the Groninger theology can be seen as an attempt to harmonise these two aspects. However, it would soon be superseded by a next phase: Modern Theology. The latter held that theology had to be in accord with prevalent scientific insights, while the Groninger theology still held that reason had to prove the truth of the Reformed dogmas. In other words, Modern Theology put reason and empiricism before belief and was explicitly anti supra-rationalist. It denied a transcendent God, and defended an immanent one, i.e. God reveals himself in nature and history. Predestination was substituted by natural determinism. Miracles were deemed impossible. Christ is not the son of God, but merely one of the wise men in human history. His words and life are taken as the true religion. Quite a number of missionaries from the NZG were adepts of Modern Theology, such as S.E. Harthoorn and D.J. ten Zeldam Ganswijk.

Summarising, the theological stance of the NZG missionaries on Java was prevalently Enlightened Theology, viz. the Groninger and Modern Theology<sup>40</sup>. That is to say, it stressed the importance of human intellect. It regarded conversion to Christianity (Protestantism) as a cognitive, and thus reasonable process. Moreover, becoming a Christian was considered a step towards civilisation and higher morality (*zedelijkheid*). For a proper understanding of the motivation of the Protestant missionaries we should keep this in mind.

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<sup>40</sup> The more orthodox missionaries of the NZG were usually sent out to the non-Islamic areas. The theological stance of the missionaries on Java was thus not representative for the whole of the NZG and certainly not for the board of NZG.

### 4.3. The training of the missionaries. Knowledge of Islam

In the *Zendelinghuis* (Missionary House) in the Dutch city of Rotterdam the missionaries received a preparation of several years for their missionary task<sup>41</sup>. Amongst their courses were some classes devoted to Mohammedanism and Heathenism (Hiebink 1855: 36-37; Smit 1995: 26-67)<sup>42</sup>. For a long period the NZG used the 1824 dictate from Jan Scharp to teach their aspiring missionaries about Islam. It includes chapters devoted to Mohammed, the *Qur'an*, Islamic sources, ethics, the main Islamic customs, holy periods, sacred places and persons, Islamic mysticism, the difference between Sunnites and Shi'ites, etc. An important part of the 240 pages long text aims at teaching how to argue the superiority of Christianity in a discussion with Muslims. These apologia employ pieces of Islamic theology as arguments in favour of Christianity (e.g. the respect Islam has for Jesus). It also isolates seven Islamic contradictions of Christianity and shows how they can be refuted (Smit 1995: 30-32). It seems that from the 1840s onwards the training of the missionaries increasingly emphasised knowledge of Islam (*ibid.*: 69 ff.). Therefore, even though their knowledge of Islam was limited -something that ran parallel to the general level of scholarly research devoted to it- the missionaries discussed in this chapter were no ignoramuses either.

G.K. Niemann, subdirector at the *Zendelinghuis* from 1848 onwards, taught classes on Islam and Eastern languages. His 1861 "Introduction to the knowledge of Islam, also with regard to the Indian Archipelago" (*Inleiding tot de kennis van den Islam, ook met betrekking tot den Indischen Archipel*) is an excellent starting point to discuss the next phase in our conceptual genealogy. It gives us an idea of what the missionaries in training in the 1860s would have been taught about Islam in Java:

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<sup>41</sup> The *Zendelinghuis* was established in 1841. Before that time missionaries were instructed either in the homes of the directors of the NZG, or from 1816 until 1821 CE in a seminary in Berkel (Noort 2012: 40-56; Hiebink 1855).

<sup>42</sup> There was no proper instruction on Islam in the training of the missionaries until about 1820 CE. The missionaries Brückner, Kam, and Schuh therefore did not receive the same education on Islam as the missionaries that followed them after 1850 (Smit 1995: 27-29; Noort 2012: 53).

“We certainly could call the Javanese Mohammedans, although it is true that many, especially in the mountain areas of the West and East of the island, are still very superficial professors of Islam (...) Mosques, (...) priests, Mohammedan institutions and forms of worship are spread over the entire island. (...) But besides all this one comes across (...) widely distributed commonly held *notions, customs and superstitions that contravene Islam.*” (Niemann 1861: 413; italics mine)<sup>43</sup>.

Niemann’s understanding of Islam in Java is relevant for two reasons. Firstly, the conceptualisation of Javanese religion has received a new twist: now the pre-Islamic “notions, customs and superstitions” are said to “contravene Islam”. This is a new element in the understanding of the Javanese religion and it has to do with the reports of the Dutch protestant missionaries discussed in this chapter. Secondly, Niemann’s “Introduction...” contains numerous references to authors and sources we have come across in the previous chapters. His knowledge about Islam in the Indonesian archipelago is built on the accounts by people such as P.P. Roorda van Eysinga, Raffles, Crawford, and Valentyn. Moreover, it also refers to the reports of Samuel E. Harthoorn, one of the missionaries central in this chapter.

#### 4.4. Close encounters of the Javanese kind: difficulties in proselytisation

Upon arrival in Java the missionaries would take some time learning Javanese and getting acquainted with their chores and with the community of Javanese (Protestant) Christians. They were expected to send back reports of their activities and progress on a regular basis. These reports were bundled in publications called *Mededeelingen van wege het Neder-*

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<sup>43</sup> My translation of: “De Javanen kan men zeker Mohammedanen noemen, al is het waar dat velen, vooral in de bergstreken van het westen en oosten des eilands, nog zeer oppervlakkige belijders van den Islam zijn (...) Moskeën (...) , priesters, mohammedaansche instellingen en vormen van godsvereering zijn over het geheele eiland verbreid (...). Maar nevens dit alles treft men (...) vrij algemeen verbreide volksbegrippen, gebruiken en bijgeloovigheden aan, die met den Islam in strijd zijn.”

*landsche Zendelinggenootschap* or MNZG (Messages from the NZG)<sup>44</sup>. These publications constituted an essential contribution to the image the Dutch public had of foreign cultures and peoples such as the Javanese. Furthermore, the missionary reports were used as primary sources by academics *in patria* who were compiling systematic accounts of the culture, ethics, religion and laws of the native Javanese. In short, for the conceptual genealogy at hand, the descriptions of Javanese religion by these Protestant missionaries are simply unavoidable.

These reports describe how the missionaries experienced their encounter with the Javanese, their culture and religion. In general, one finds that upon arrival in Java they appear to be idealists with a strong desire to spread the true faith, and to save the indigenous peoples from the darkness that is a life in the absence of knowledge of Christ. This sentiment would start to wither during the first years of their stay, when they were becoming familiar with local customs and were becoming integrated in Javanese Protestant Christian communities such as those in Semarang, Malang, Kediri, Surabaya and arguably the most famous one in Mojowarno<sup>45</sup>. Initially, these fresh missionaries were deeply moved upon seeing and hearing their Javanese brethren taking part in the Lord's Supper, proclaiming the confession of faith, or praying the Our Father. Surely this was proof that Divine providence had not overlooked the fate of the poor Javanese. However, as their knowledge of the Javanese language and culture improved, the missionaries became somewhat suspicious about the integrity of the faith of the Javanese Christians. Surely, they were very apt in proclaiming the confession, in saying out loud the Ten

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<sup>44</sup> Parallel to the MNZG, which ran from 1857 to 1919, another publication appeared: *Maandberigten voorgelezen op de maandelijksche bedestonden van het Nederlandsche Zendeling Genootschap betrekkelijk de uitbreiding van het Christendom bijzonder onder de Heidenen* which ran from 1828-1917. It contained summaries of the missionaries' reports which were read out at communal prayer sessions.

<sup>45</sup> Mojowarno was a settlement founded by the Javanese Christian Abisai Ditotrino in 1846, it developed strongly in the following years. Although the congregation was led by the Javanese Christian Paulus Tosari, it stood under the supervision of the mentioned missionary Jellesma from 1851 to 1858. Some historians regard the founding of Mojowarno as the true beginning of the Javanese Church (Van Akkeren 1970: 97-102). Many Protestant Christian villages were settlements born out of the migration of Javanese (Protestant) Christians from Mojowarno. An illustration to its fame is Kartini's desire to move there in order to enrol in a course for midwives (Kartini 1923 [1912]: 287, 294-96, 298).

Commandments, they prayed the Our Father in an admirable way. But, something seemed to be lacking, something seemed to be off.

In their reports, the missionaries complain that the Javanese Christians seemed not to understand what they were saying. For example, they remained unaware that Christ had died for their sins, they were unconcerned about their wellbeing in the hereafter, some denied to being sinful or having a soul all together. Although very involved with the ritual correctness of the Lord's Supper, they did not understand its meaning. Moreover, the Javanese Christians continued practices that were in contradiction to Protestant teachings: some Javanese Christians still had their sons circumcised, some would still hold a *slametan* on the occasion of harvests, some would still make vows to deities or ancestors. In short, the missionaries came to see that many Javanese did not understand what it means to be a Christian. Some Javanese even thought their conversion to Christianity had turned them into Dutchmen: they would start wearing Western clothes and thought they no longer had to fulfil manual labor chores. Thus, the initial period of enchantment would sooner or later make way for disillusion and frustration. Their efforts at proselytisation often seemed futile and generally speaking they had a hard time making sense of the religious behaviour of the Javanese. This inability to understand Javanese religious behaviour certainly matched the Javanese trouble at coming to terms with Christianity. We will return to this mutual misunderstanding in the course of this dissertation. For now we will focus on how the Protestant missionaries came to describe the Javanese religious condition. As we will see, they did so in terms of syncretism.

#### 4.5. The birth of the Javanese Muslim. A discourse of syncretism

As we have seen over the last chapters, the description and conceptualisation of 'Javanese Islam' with the characteristics and themes familiar to us today are part of a larger project in which the West attempted to make sense of Javanese culture. This process spans several centuries and shows both continuity and evolution. A crucial step was taken in the middle of the 19th century by three Dutchmen, all tied to the Protestant church. The first, J.F.G. Brumund (1814-1863) was a minister to the *Indische Kerk* and an esteemed scholar in his time. He had studied theology



and philology. He had been stationed in Ambon and Surakarta before being dispatched to the East Javanese city of Surabaya in 1851. Besides his obligations as minister for the Surabayan congregation, he frequently visited the Javanese Christian communities in the surrounding area of Surabaya. He was, therefore, not only a man of great education but also familiar with the situation in the field. Amongst his writings were, in his day, authoritative publications on the propagation of the Christian faith in Java, on the Javanese educational system, on Java's archaeological remains, and on the impact of Hinduism on Java (Veth 1864).

The second, S.E. Harthoorn (1831-1883), was a Dutch Protestant missionary who, through the combination of his missionary experience and a remarkable intellectual zeal, had come to the conclusion that the attempts at converting the Javanese would have to remain fruitless as long as the Javanese had not been properly 'educated' and 'civilised'. Due to his critique on the missionary work, and especially due to the debate following this critique, the *NZG* went through a deep crisis. (Boone 1997: 120-25). His descriptions of Javanese religious practices as published in *MNZG* were widely cited and became the stock-in-trade of scholarly accounts on Javanese religion - as instanced by the above mentioned Niemann.

The third, another Dutch Protestant missionary in East Java, was C. Poensen (1836-1919). By trade a paperhanger, he received an education in the Rotterdam *Zendelinghuis*. He was introduced to the Javanese language in East Java by the missionary Hoesoo. Much like Harthoorn, he was a man of the field, but contrary to the latter he remained positive about the chances of bringing the Javanese to Christianity. In comparison, his theological stance was more conservative than Harthoorn's. His translations of Javanese texts, numerous descriptions of Islam in Java, and his teaching of the Javanese language in Delft made him well-known and influential amongst scholars on Java (Nauta 1978: 258). Still, his intellectual and scholarly abilities were subject to criticism from the famous Islam scholar Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (cf. Poensen 1886: vii; Snouck Hurgronje 1886).

These three gentlemen had a number of things in common. Firstly, all three had been involved in spreading the Protestant faith in the East Java. Poensen and Harthoorn were engaged in missionary activities,

Brumund visited many settlements of Javanese Christians on which he reported extensively (Veth 1864; Brumund and Brumund 1854). Therefore, they were thoroughly familiar with both the Islamic Javanese and Christian Javanese of that region. Especially so Poensen and Harthoorn, who had been living for extended periods of time amongst East Javanese villagers and were without a doubt amongst the first true ethnographers of Javanese village life. Secondly, they were all convinced Protestants, albeit pertaining to different theological strands. Consequently, their understanding of the world, its history and the nations inhabiting it, was essentially confined by Protestant theology. Thirdly, all three were well versed in the relevant literature on Java at that time, as discussed in the previous chapter. Lastly, their accounts of the Javanese religious condition became the sources, or rather the data, for orientalist scholars in the Netherlands, scholars such as P.J. Veth and C. Snouck Hurgronje. In other words, as much as their descriptions of Javanese religion built on those before them, so were theirs building blocks for future ones. However, what makes this phase unique, is that it sees the birth of the concept of a syncretist Javanese Islam -the concept as it is still used today.

#### 4.5.1. The first Javanese Muslim

As far as I have been able to trace, it is Brumund who introduces the concept of the Javanese Muslim -and thus of 'Javanese Islam'- in his 1854 *Berigten omtrent de evangelisatie van Java* (Bulletins on the evangelisation of Java). It is a compilation of his journals of visits to the different Javanese Christian communities in the area around Surabaya. In this text he speaks consistently of the "Javanese Mohammedan". For example:

"Let us have a look outside. The prayer house with its higher roof, that rises in the middle of the village centre, is a bamboo building. It stands between two trunks of waringin trees, still rooted in the ground. They must have been exceptionally heavy and old trees. The *Javanese Mohammedan* believes that evil spirits live in such trees. He fears them, takes his fuming patera there and keeps his axe far away from them. The spirit that resides there would certainly pun-

ish them with sickness, disaster or death.” (Brumund and Brumund 1854: 96; italics mine)<sup>46</sup>

In the following pages Brumund further describes the Javanese Muslim as being indifferent to the run down state of his own *Mesjid* (ibid.: 97); as having no sense of history, which implies that he is less evolved (ibid.: 98-99); as being only superficially Muslim (ibid.: 54-55); and generally being very superstitious (ibid.: 107). Summarising, in Brumund’s description, the Javanese Mohammedan is a self-confessed Muslim who still practices the ancient superstitions:

“Even though the Qur’an teaches the worship of the one true God, its priests in Java speak to their laity more of evil spirits, good and bad days, incantations, and other Heathen superstitions, more easily go with them to chase off a devil here and there through prayer or by holding a *sedekah*<sup>47</sup>, drape a garland around a Hindu statue or idol and rub its face with *boreh boreh*<sup>48</sup> or light incense for it, than that they are preachers for Mohammed’s monotheism. They will not deny this teaching, but neither will they insist upon it; it’s more an idle teaching from their lips, which they deny by their daily priestly deed. This is also proven by the common

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<sup>46</sup> My translation of: “Wij willen eens buiten gaan zien. Het bedehuis, dat met zijn hooger dak in het midden der dorpskom verrijst, is een bamboezen gebouw. Het staat tusschen twee nog in den grond gewortelde tronken van waringi’s. Zij moeten bijzonder zware en oude boomen zijn ge- weest. De Javaan-Mohamedaan meent, dat in zulke boomen booze geesten wonen. Hij vreesst hen, brengt er zijn rookende offerschaal en blijft verre van hen met zijne bijl. De geest, die daarin woont, zou hem en de zijnen daarvoor immers zekerlijk met ziekte, ramp of dood straffen.”

<sup>47</sup> *Sedekah* is used by Brumund as a synonym for *slametan*, which is a prayer meal and the central ritual in Javanese religious life. Usually the *slametan* is considered to be beneficial for the living, while the *sedekah* -also a kind of prayer meal and almost identical to the *slametan*- is beneficial for the dead.

<sup>48</sup> *Boreh boreh* is a yellow paste made from, amongst other ingredients, curcuma.

gross and crude idolatry of the Javanese despite their title of worshippers of the only True one.” (ibid.: 63)<sup>49</sup>

According to Brumund, then, Javanese Islam is a nominal Islam, that is only outwardly professed, the core of it is Hinduism and worship of nature (what today we would call ‘animism’). The same idea re-emerges with Harthoorn and Poensen. However, they clearly describe a union of the many superstitious beliefs and ceremonies with Mohammedanism, a union they call syncretism.

#### 4.5.2. Javanism and the syncretist Javanese

The very first mention of the term ‘Javanism’ is in Harthoorn’s annual report of the year 1857, *De zending op Java en meer bepaald die van Malang* (The mission on Java and more specifically the one of Malang), where he analyses the mental-moral-religious condition of the Javanese and the way this influences their behaviour. A good understanding of this condition, Harthoorn believes, will enable the assessment of the chances of effective evangelisation (Harthoorn 1860).

The term ‘Javanism’ actually refers to the same phenomena as Brumund’s ‘Javanese Islam’. To Harthoorn, the religion in which the Javanese consciousness has its origin is not Islam, but Javanism -and Javanese Islam is but a subcategory to Javanism (ibid.: 251). Therefore, Islam might be state religion and the Javanese might be Muslim from a political point of view, their indigenous or popular religion (*volksgodsdienst*) is Javanism. In Harthoorn’s own words:

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<sup>49</sup> My translation of: “Moge de Koran ook de aanbedding van den éénen waarachtigen God leeren; zijne Priesters op Java spreken hunne leeken meer van booze geesten, goede en kwade dagen, bezweringen en andere Heidensche bijgeloovigheden, gaan eer met hen hier of daar een'duivel door bidden of het houden van sedeka's verjagen, een verminkt hindoe- of afgodsbeeld een bloemenkrans omhangen en zijn gelaat met boree boree bestrijken of wierook voor hem ontsteken, dan dat zij predikers van Mohamed's Monotheïsme zijn. Zij zullen die leer wel niet ontkennen, maar ook niet aandringen; het is meer een ijdele leer van hunne lippen, welke zij dagelijks door hunne zoogenaamde priesterlijke handelingen loochenen. Dat bewijst dan ook wel de algemeen heerschende zoo schromelijke en grove afgoderij der Javanen in weerwil van hunnen naam als aanbidder van den eenen Waarachtige.”

“It [Javanism] is not an original religious doctrine, not an original system, but the *unnatural union* of the old religious service with the indic and arabic religion and philosophy. The old religious service, consists in the worship of nature and the adjuration of ghosts, enriched with a couple of ideas from elsewhere.” (ibid.: 111; italics mine)<sup>50</sup>

Elsewhere in the same report Harthoorn calls this “unnatural union” syncretism, the cause of which ultimately lies in the inertia of the Javanese, i.e. in their laziness; which in turn had been caused by Java’s bountiful nature that fulfilled the Javanese’s modest needs.

“This fundamental characteristic, this tendency to rest, the to him comfortable sweetness of bloatedness appears everywhere, and is the final cause of his *syncretism*, of his boundless confusion of ideas.” (ibid.: 246-47; italics mine)<sup>51</sup>

So, here we have it: the concept of a syncretist Javanese religion, completely developed and exactly one century before Clifford Geertz’ *The Religion of Java* hit the bookshelves. The “unnatural union” Harthoorn speaks of is a union of different religious systems, such as: worship of natural forces, worship of deceased ancestors, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Shivaism, and of course Islam. It is deemed unnatural, because strictly speaking some of these systems would be mutually exclusive -something Brumund pointed out as well. Bringing such divergent religious strands together, reconciling them, is called syncretism. To a large degree, Harthoorn’s description echoes the received wisdom we’ve already sketched in the previous chapters. What is new, is that he calls this mixing “syncretism” and baptises the mixture “Javanism”. Moreover, he presents it in a consistent manner. He discusses first the beliefs and then the practices or ceremonies of this religion. His aim is to find the core of Javanism and explain its syncretism. After all, this core is the mental-

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<sup>50</sup> My translation of: “Het [Javanisme] is geene eigene geloofsleer, geen eigen stelsel, maar de onnatuurlijke vereeniging van de oude eeredienst met de indische en arabische godsdienst en wijsbegeerte. Die oude eeredienst, [bestaat] in de vereering van de natuur en bezwering van geesten, verrijkt met enkele ideeën van elders...”

<sup>51</sup> My translation of: “Die grondkaraktertrek, die neiging tot rust, dat hem behagelijk zoete der vadsigheid komt overal uit, en is ook de laatste oorzaak van synkretisme, van zijn grenzeloze verwarring van ideeën.”

moral-religious condition of the Javanese, where Harthoorn hopes to find an explanation for the difficulties in converting the Javanese. We will return to these descriptions of beliefs and ceremonies in the next chapter when we discuss *ngelmu* (science, knowledge) and *slametan*.

#### 4.5.3. Syncretist Javanese Islam

Poensen's first descriptions of the religion of Java are featured in his 1864 and 1865 reports entitled *Een en ander over den godsdienstigen toestand van den Javaan* (Something about the religious condition of the Javanese). Even though it is not as clearly argued as and less concise than Harthoorn's account, it was also quite influential. Poensen's rendering of Javanese Islam also needs to be situated within his missionary endeavours. And similarly to Harthoorn's it reveals a focus on religious beliefs and practices. Poensen was obviously influenced by both Brumund and Harthoorn, as he refers to them often. He consistently talks about Javanese Muslims and characterises Javanese Islam as follows:

“The religion of the Javanese world is the product of Buddhism, Brahmanism, Shivaism, Mohammedanism, etc. that has not been processed and brought to a whole, but has been *all mixed up and miraculously confused* (...) A number of eras and occurrences has brought the Javanese world into contact with confessors of different religions; she has adopted something from each, outwardly and often unconsciously,” (Poensen 1865: 178; italics mine)<sup>52</sup>

In later works Poensen calls this miraculous confusion “syncretism” (e.g. 1886: 17, 66, 69). Like Harthoorn, he claims this syncretism is the result of the nature of the Javanese: their passivity and laziness, their inferior mental condition.

Poensen's description is also very much in line with what his predecessors had been saying: the Javanese are Muslims, but only superficially

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<sup>52</sup> My translation of: “De godsdienst der tegenwoordige javaansche wereld is het product van Boeddhisme, Brahmanisme, Çivaïsme, Mohammadanisme, enz., niet verwerkt en tot een geheel gebragt, maar alles doorengemengd, en wonderlijk verward (...) Eene reeks van tijden en voorvallen heeft de javaansche wereld in aanraking gebragt met de belijders van verschillende godsdiensten; zij heeft van allen wat overgenomen, uiterlijk en vaak zich zelf onbewust.”

(ibid.: 3-4); they profess Islam only outwardly, both laymen and clergy; they have little to no knowledge of the *Qur'an*, except maybe for a few proverbs and sayings; those who know how to recite a couple of Arabic formulas, do not know their meaning; the Javanese hold ideas and conceptions that are in contradiction to Islam and are in fact of Brahmanic, Buddhist or Shivaist origin; generally speaking it suffices for a Javanese to be circumcised to consider himself a Muslim (Poensen 1864: 215). Poensen, like Harthoorn and Brumund, thus adds more substance to old convictions by relating his day-to-day experiences with the Javanese. His description of Javanese Islam is actually a large listing of all the different Javanese religious beliefs and practices. As he attempts to order them, Poensen comes very close to the idea of a spectrum of different Javanese Islams, *i.e.* different sects that can be distinguished according to the extent they deviate from the teachings of Islam (ibid.: 217).

#### 4.5.4. Summary

Taken together, the works of Brumund, Harthoorn and Poensen signal a new phase in the understanding of religion in Java. Firstly, the concept of 'Javanese Islam' and its counterpart 'Javanism' are introduced. Secondly, what was previously thought of as a mere mixing of tenets from different religious systems is now conceptualised as syncretism. What 'syncretism' expresses, more so than 'mixing', is the idea that the different religious tenets brought together, actually do not go together. This is the theme that links the quotes from Niemann, Brumund, Harthoorn, and Poensen. Thirdly, the accounts from Harthoorn and Poensen (and Brumund) are rich in ethnographic detail and were treated as data, *i.e.* as facts, by other scholars such as Veth and Snouck Hurgronje.

#### 4.6. Familiar themes

By now, it should be no surprise that the ethnographic accounts by the missionaries feature the same themes as delineated in the previous chapters. We can discern a loop in the conceptual genealogy up to this moment. Already in the very first accounts of religion in Java, we noticed the emergence of a number of familiar themes. Successive generations

treated these accounts as information on Java and used the employed concepts and themes to structure their own experience of Java. A case in point is the generation of the early orientalists, who structured the ‘evidence’ drawn from Javanese texts, archaeological finds, and personal experience along the very same themes. The end result are the histories and handbooks discussed in the previous chapter. That same process is repeated by the missionaries. In the descriptions of their daily experiences amongst village Javanese, they use these same themes to render their experiences intelligible. Consequently, the loop strengthens the ‘veracity’ of these themes, as they lend descriptive intelligibility to the Western experience of Java. Interestingly, the missionary accounts do not only discuss the Javanese Muslims, but also the Javanese Christians. And there are some remarkable overlaps in the descriptions of both.

The first communities of Javanese Christians, where these missionaries dwelled, had developed more or less independently from official institutions such as the *Indische Kerk* and the NZG. After all, as we saw, it is only after the ‘discovery’ of these communities that the missionaries were allowed into Java. The first objective of the NZG was to guide these existing communities, proselytisation actually came second. These first communities had sprung forth from the initiatives of lay evangelists. A famous instance is that of Johannes Emde (1774-1859), a German watchmaker in colonial Surabaya. The missionary Kam had, before his departure to Ambon, convinced Emde to commence active evangelisation of the Javanese of Surabaya. To this purpose they had founded, together with eight other Europeans, an evangelical society that became known as the “Saints of Surabaya” (Van Welzen 1921: 16-19, Guillot 1981: 56-70, 71). They made use of the Javanese translation of the New Testament and some tracts by Brückner. One of the members of Emde’s society was the mentioned Coenraad L. Coolen, who would found a prosperous Javanese Christian community in the East-Javanese village of Ngoro (Adriaanse 1899: 5). Coolen, whose father was Russian and whose mother a Solonese aristocrat, was also a lay evangelist and had converted many Javanese to Christianity, amongst them quite a lot whose names return in the missionary accounts. His community in Ngoro was one of the important areas for the spread of Christianity on Java. However, his version of Protestantism was often considered too Javanese in the eyes of the missionaries and the relationship between them and Coolen remained tensed (Guillot 1981: 71-87). In communities such as Ngoro the



missionaries experienced the Javanese religious condition firsthand and these encounters were described in their reports (e.g. Van Akkeren 1970: 65).

In what follows, I will refer to such reports, including some by missionaries other than Poensen and Harthoorn. Regardless of what they call the religion of the Javanese -Javanism, Javanese Islam, Islam, superstitions, etc.- their accounts consistently depict the same phenomena. Since their main concern was to bring the Javanese to the true faith, i.e. Christianity, they seem to have run into the same obstacles and encountered the same problems in understanding the religious life of the Javanese.

#### 4.6.1. Proof of being Muslim/Christian: the practice of certain precepts

On numerous occasions the missionary accounts mention on what basis the Javanese consider themselves to be Christian: they think they are Christians because they are able to declare the Our Father, the Ten Commandments, or the declaration of faith. A case in point is the critique of the missionary Jansz on Tunggul Wulung, whose baptismal name was Ibrahim. Tunggul Wulung, originally a hermit on mount Kelud, had been introduced to Christianity by Coolen and Emde, and had subsequently been instructed and baptised by Jellesma. He carried out a lot of colportage and proselytisation in Middle Java, out of which communities of Javanese Christians would grow (Guillot 1981: 88-91; Adriaanse 1899: 40-47). In a 1856 diary entry Jansz ventilates his very low esteem of Tunggul Wulung's Christian faith and of his qualities as proselytiser:

“... Besides, he [Tunggul Wulung] cannot teach these people [the Javanese] anything except for the Ten Commandments, the Our Father and the Confession of Faith. *It is apparent that he considers himself adequately Christian, because he knows these three things.*” (Jansz 1997: 113; italics mine)<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> My translation of: "Overigens kan hij [Tunggul Wulung] den lieden [de Javanen] niets leeren dan de Tien Geboden, het Onze Vader en de Geloofsbelijdenis. Het blijkt dat hij zich genoegzaam Christen acht, dewijl hij deze drie zaken kent."

It is a recurring theme in the missionaries' descriptions of Javanese Christians that they consider themselves to be Christians solely on the account of being able to recite certain prayers or articles of faith -or even by only once having recited them (cf. Harthoorn 1857: 199). This is parallel to the, by that time, 'well-established' observation that Javanese Muslims consider themselves to be Muslim on the account of having once pronounced the Shahada, being circumcised and e.g. abstaining from eating pork. That is to say, just like their Christian counterparts, the Javanese Muslims appear to consider the practice of certain customs to be the hallmark or sufficient proof of belonging to this or that religion.

#### 4.6.2. Superficial Islam/Christianity and absence of true belief

In the eyes of the missionaries, the ability to recite the mentioned prayers and formulas, did not imply that the Javanese Christians had a strong faith. After all, as for instance the missionary Wessel Hoeszoo notes, the Javanese really did not understand what they were saying. An illustration is e.g. their use of the articles of faith as magic formula to ward off snakes. Neither did they have a notion of Biblical history (Hoeszoo 1863: 174), nor did they understand basic Christian ideas. For example, when the missionary Jellesma asks a Javanese woman who wants to be baptised for whose sins Christ had died upon the cross, the answer is for his own (Ten Zeldam Ganswijk 1858: 111-12). To the missionaries this ignorance about the fundamental tenets of Christianity was an indication of the superficiality of the Javanese Christians' belief. After all, if one does not even know what the core Christian beliefs are, then how can one claim to be a Christian?

The missionaries recognised similar patterns in the behaviour of Javanese Muslims. Poensen for example relates his conversation with a Javanese Muslim who claims that Mohammed must have been the first man, and not Adam (Poensen 1864: 241-45). Harthoorn quotes a Javanese Muslim who claims that sin is already with Allah, because he let *Idadjiel* (Lucifer) seduce Eve and Adam and later mankind (Harthoorn 1860: 230). Harthoorn also observes that the Javanese are unaware of the nature of Allah: some Javanese Muslims think Allah has a father; some wish for a *ngelmu* higher than the one about Allah, some wish to know what the seed (i.e. the origin) of Allah is; some say Allah is just a name

or a form of that what exists; some say Mohammed is bigger than Allah because the latter has no characteristics (*sipat*) -he cannot hear, think, speak..., while Mohammed can; some *santri* claim that man existed already before Allah; some claim Allah is everywhere and thus also inside man, in the stomach; some say that Allah is the father and Mohammed is the mother of man (ibid.: 234-37). Therefore, to the missionaries, all this 'ignorance' indicates an absence of real veneration. Even becoming a *santri*, Harthoorn points out, is for many Javanese merely a way to make money and achieve social esteem, and not for obtaining salvation. An often heard assessment, therefore, was that the Javanese only adhered to Christianity or Islam on the outside, i.e. they only adhered to the 'exteriorities'. However, on the inside they were still Heathens, animists, or ancestor worshippers.

#### 4.6.3. Quick conversion to Christianity and Islam

This 'absence of true belief', or the presence of 'superficial' or 'exterior belief', also translates into the motives for conversion. Often, the reason for Javanese to convert was recognised (by the missionaries) as very practical, viz. a certain benefit in the here and now, instead of redemption from sins or a happy hereafter. For example, Hoesoo notes that the reason for most Javanese to move to Mojowarno, i.e. to convert to Christianity, was "... material gain: land, a powerful *ngelmu*, the coming of the *ratu adil* (the just king), a marriage." (Van Akkeren 1970: 101). Conversion could also be motivated by hope for exemption from statute labour (Hoesoo 1853: 84), by monetary reasons (Hoesoo 1855: 27-28), by the hope of attaining the same status as the Dutch (Van Rhijn 1851: 59). Concomitant to these motivations is the ease with which the Javanese convert to Christianity (Ten Zeldam Ganswijk 1857: 108). Of course, the Javanese just as easily converted back to Islam if that turned out to be convenient.

#### 4.6.4. The Javanese adhere to practices from different beliefs

Finally, the missionaries describe, just like the orientalist, travellers and VOC personnel we discussed before, how the Javanese combine prac-

tices from different religions. The main difference is that, when compared to previous descriptions, their accounts abound with ethnographic detail. In this sense, their descriptions add substance to the structures that had already been laid out centuries before. Ten Zeldam Ganswijk e.g. notes how the Javanese when they convert to Christianity, simply adopt some new customs like baptism, attending church and reading the bible, but continue to adhere to the old “sins” and “superstitions”. In other words, conversion did not change the belief system of the Javanese, they merely added some practices from Christianity to their existing repertoire (ibid.: 108). H. Smeding, another missionary, visits Coolen’s community and notes that the Javanese Christians, although they have been baptised and imagine themselves to be better than other Javanese, still very much behave like their non-Christian counterparts. They still hold *slametans*, they still diligently deliver *pitrah*<sup>54</sup>, and they still have their children circumcised. To Smeding it is obvious: a Christian Javanese is just like the other Javanese, with this difference that he has added some new religious concepts to the ones he already had. Moreover, he still maintains the old ways, even though they are not corroborated by Christianity (Smeding 1861: 279-80). Hoetzoo makes the same assessment, when he notices that the Javanese Christians still hold *slametans*, cling to their old superstitions and continue making oaths (to ancestors or spirits). On one occasion Hoetzoo tries to convince a Javanese Christian not to hold a meal consecrated to the prophet Mohammed, because he is a Christian now. The man answers him that he is aware of this, but he will organise the meal nevertheless, just to be sure (Hoetzoo 1863: 165-73).

#### 4.6.5. Summary

The above paragraphs illustrate how the missionary accounts repeat the same topics that appeared in the descriptions from previous centuries. Two things are important. Firstly, the themes are used to structure the descriptions of their encounters with the Javanese. In other words, these themes enable the missionaries to make sense of their experiences. They help to make familiar what is in fact utterly unfamiliar. Ever since the

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<sup>54</sup> Smeding defines *pitrah* as the rice that is handed to the (Muslim) “priests” at the end of the (Ramadan) fast.

very first encounters of Westerners with Javanese these themes are being rehashed over and over again. In the process they achieved the status of truisms about the Javanese and the nature of the Javanese religious condition. However, this does mean they should be interpreted as statements about Javanese reality (although they certainly were intended as such) but rather as the elements that structured the West's experience of that reality. As we will see, these structuring elements make sense within a certain conceptual context that is theological in nature. Secondly, there seems to be little difference between the Javanese Muslims and the Javanese Christians when it comes to how they treat their respective religions. If there is one thing that stands out, it must be a shared 'practical' and 'pragmatic' approach. Practical: Christianity and Islam, or at least certain elements from them, are treated as *practices*, while Christian and Islamic *beliefs* are neglected or subordinated to this praxis. Pragmatic: conversion to either Islam or Christianity serves specific, concrete purposes. Similarly, religious rituals are executed and certain doctrines are pronounced with the objective of furthering concrete results (e.g. warding off snakes). In other words, the missionary accounts from the 19th century not only reveal how the missionaries' experiences are structured, but also point to certain patterns in the 'religious' behaviour of the Javanese. We will pick up this second point in chapters seven and eight.

#### 4.7. Conclusion

In a way, we could say that our conceptual genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' ends here. After all, as we have seen, as early as the 1860's the concept of a syncretist Javanese Islam (or Javanism) was already fully crystallised. The way these concepts are defined is identical to current definitions of e.g. "*abangan* religion", "*abanganism*" "*agami jawi*", and even "*mystic synthesis*" as discussed in the first chapter. It seems that the only evolution over the last century and a half has been to adjust the negative connotations associated with the idea of syncretism. Syncretism has for a long time been regarded as the hallmark of the Javanese religious condition. For many scholars this syncretism was associated with a denial of the 'truly' Islamic character of Javanese religion and the concomitant claim that its 'true' core is either animism or Hinduism. As we shall see in the next chapter, post-colonial critique of syncretist 'Javanese Islam' focuses on

those two points. After denying a syncretist Javanese Islam, it substitutes it for a Javanese Islam, that is 'truly' Islamic. As a result of this post-colonial critique syncretism has become something of a cuss word when applied to Javanese religion. Some scholars, however, have advocated a far more positive evaluation of this syncretism. A case in point is Andrew Beatty's remarkable work on the Javanese *slametan* (1999). His discussion of this Javanese ritual as a case of 'syncretism in practice' aims to show the positive, beneficial qualities of syncretism. After all, the *slametan* as an instance of syncretism in practice brings forth tolerance amongst Javanese villagers. Before we turn our attention to these matters, let's consider where this genealogy has left us and what we have discovered so far. In this chapter we have established three things.

Firstly, the descriptions of 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' in the missionaries' accounts are very much in line with the descriptions of Javanese religion from previous generations. We have noticed that, while the early orientalists from chapter three, talked about the *mixing* of religious practices and beliefs of different descent, the missionaries describe this in terms of syncretism. The latter term stresses the incompatibility of said religious beliefs. Still, the structure of the concept of Javanese religion has remained the same. In the next chapter we will see how this continuity also extends to the structuring concepts and conceptual context.

Secondly, we have established that the way these missionaries approached their missionary tasks was determined by their theological background. The NZG missionaries in Java were pre-dominantly inclined towards Enlightened theology. We will bring this observation to its logical conclusion in the next chapter. As we saw in the previous chapters the conceptual context within which the discourse on Javanese religion is to be situated was from the start Biblical and theological in nature. An analysis of the understanding of 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' by the missionaries will show that these two concepts are actually theological concepts.

This raises an important issue: if the missionaries' understanding of syncretist 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' depends upon their theology, and if e.g. Geertz concept of *abangan* religion is identical to that of 'Javanism', what does this imply for Geertz' understanding of Javanese religion? We will also return to this issue in the next chapter.

Thirdly, over the last three chapters we have seen how the descriptions of Javanese religions are all structured along the same themes. I suggest that these themes are in fact constantly being rehashed. Furthermore, I take this rehashing as evidence of a loop between the Western experience of certain aspects of Javanese cultural reality and the descriptions thereof. We will take up this topic again in chapter 7. For now it suffices to point out that these themes indicate the way the discourse on Javanese religion has been constrained. That is to say, the themes illustrate how these descriptions are always set up along the same lines and as such they demonstrate the limits on what could and could not be conceived of. As we had already established in the second chapter, the discourse on Javanese religion is a Western discourse. Over the next chapters I will argue that what makes this discourse recognisably Western is actually the Christian theology at its origin. In other words, this discourse has from the start been constrained by Christian theology. As we will see in the next chapter, the conceptualisation of 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' by the Protestant missionaries illustrates this perfectly.





## 5. From theology to post-colonialism: syncretism versus local Islam

In this chapter I have two objectives. Firstly, I will further explore the theological origins of the concept of syncretist Javanese Islam. I do this by focusing on the conceptual framework within which and the structuring concepts with which this 'Javanese Islam' was conceptualised. Secondly, I will discuss the post-colonial critique on the concept of syncretist Javanese Islam, together with the alternative conceptualisation usually offered by these critiques, viz. Javanese Islam as a native or local Islam.

In the course of this dissertation I have repeatedly pointed to the theological, even Biblical, nature of the conceptual framework within which the discussed descriptions of Javanese religion had been effectuated. The framework, although evolving over time, has been present from the very first descriptions onwards. In the previous chapter I have argued that the missionaries' understanding of Javanese culture was structured and constrained by the Enlightened Protestant theology of the 19th century. In the following paragraphs I will take this observation to its logical conclusion: the concept of syncretist Javanese Islam is actually a piece of Protestant theology.

### 5.1. Conceptual context: religious experience and historical evolution

It is hard to deny that the missionaries' descriptions of the Javanese religious condition have demeaning and racist overtones. Consequently and rightfully so, this kind of description has been criticised by post-colonial scholars. However, by simply dismissing such statements on the basis of them being fiercely judgemental, racist, etc. we overlook where the real misrepresentation lies. After all, keeping in mind the logical inconsistency discussed in chapter one, the missionaries are taking the 'religious syncretism' of the Javanese to its logical conclusions. That is, they indeed describe the religion of the Javanese as syncretist, accept the inconsistency inherent to this representation of the Javanese religious con-

dition, and explicitly condone the consequences of it: the Javanese are deemed both inauthentic and mentally inferior. In other words, the racism seems to be the logical consequence of the misrepresentation that is syncretist 'Javanese Islam', rather than it is itself the actual misrepresentation.

An analysis of the conceptual context, i.e. the conceptual framework within which it makes sense to speak of syncretist Javanese Islam, will help us to further pinpoint the origin and nature of this misrepresentation. In previous chapters I have already drawn attention to this context. Two things stand out. Firstly, this conceptual framework is shared by Westerners over several generations. On the one hand, this means there is a certain conceptual continuity over time, which guarantees that descriptions of Javanese Islam are intelligible over several generations. On the other, it means that we have no indication that this conceptual framework is also shared by non-Westerners, *in casu* the Javanese. In other words, up to this point the discourse on Javanese Islam is a Western one, where we have not yet heard a Javanese voice. Secondly, this framework is theological in nature. I have already pointed out several theological 'verities' that guided the way the West has tried to make sense of Javanese religion. By explaining how the missionaries' description of 'Javanese Islam' is a function of their theology, I will bring this thread to its endpoint: the concept of 'Javanese Islam' is intelligible only against a theological background.

#### 5.1.1. Religion as an answer to religious experience

In the following paragraphs, I will focus on Harthoorn's discussion of Javanism. Brumund and Poensen's thoughts on Javanese Islam were very close, if not identical, to his. Harthoorn characterises Javanism as the original or natural religion of the Javanese (*de natuurlijke eeredienst*) which, Harthoorn posits, *must* have been worship of nature and of the deceased. The Javanese do this, because, at some moment lost in history, they *must* have been in total awe of the universe, a universe they *must* have considered animate. Because they *must* have assumed that the deceased had influence on the course of things, they believed that, by means of placating them, they could obtain their assistance in avoiding

mishap and securing desired outcomes (Harthoorn 1860: 108 ff.). This argument, or rather chain of assumptions, is entirely derived from the Dutch Enlightened theology, such as the Groninger and Modern Theology, that emerged in the wake of Schleiermacher. I will illustrate this by discussing, very succinctly, one thread in the theology of Scholten, the initiator and one of the leading men of Modern Theology (Roessingh 1914).

In a way identical to Schleiermacher's, Scholten provides a foundation of religion and subsequently compares the world's religions (Scholten 1859 [1853]: 1ff.). Scholten posits that the belief in God goes together with (is the result of) a feeling of total dependence that is present in each nation (*volk*). Depending on the level of its intellectual and moral civilisation, this feeling is expressed differently. As long as reason is not yet developed in man, he expresses this belief in God in images, brought forth by the imagination. This is the position of the old religions. The new religions, i.e. the religion of Israel, express the concept of God with reason. Summarising, religion is an answer to a religious experience of total dependence and different religions are to be compared on the basis of how they express the concept of God.

### 5.1.2. Historical evolution of religions

Besides this psychological dimension, the ranking of religions also has a historical dimension. Since religions evolve, they go through different phases. An old religion, then, is equated with a primitive, non-evolved religion. New religions are evolved, which means that they have already passed through the more primitive states. Scholten arranges the world's religions as follows. The first forms of religion (historically and psychologically) are fetishism and worship of nature (what we today would call animism). This is the religion of the least developed and mentally most confused nations. In this primitive state men will find God in each unknown object. From this the second form springs forth: a religion that looks for God in nature and in natural forces. However, a true concept of God is still absent. Examples are Confucianism, Brahmanism, and Buddhism. The latter is seen as a reaction to Brahmanism. It does not look for a force in nature, but rather is a way of personal, individual wor-

ship. These religions, like e.g. Brahmanism, tend to evolve into polytheisms. The different natural forces become personalised. Scholten recognises such tendencies as well in Persian, Egyptian and Greek religion. Different from all these (previous) religions, from fetishism to Greek religion, is the Israelite religion of Abraham. Its origin is a fetishism, that developed over symbolism into prophetism (ibid.: 14-15). From this prophetism, i.e. the highest form the Israelite religion managed to achieve, Christianity sprung forth. It purged the Israelite religion of its nationalist expectations and achieved a purely spiritual knowledge and worship of God. Jesus Christ was the one who understood the true meaning and purpose of his religion. He was aware of the perfect union of man and God, which became the founding principle of the religion named after him: Christianity. Christianity realises individual development, in the awareness of one's own strength and capabilities, while being conscious of one's complete dependence on God, who permeates everything and thus works in the totality of the universe and thus also in man (ibid.: 16).

### 5.1.3. Javanism as a 'primitive' religion

Harthoorn's description of and exposé on Javanism obviously reflects the understanding of religions as propounded by Scholten (cf. Harthoorn 1860: 108 ff.; Scholten 1859 [1853]). Of interest here is Harthoorn's portrayal of Javanism as a low or primitive religion -i.e. as a kind of animism or worship of nature, somewhere between the first and second steps of religious evolution as described by Scholten. As Harthoorn's explanation goes, the Javanese worship natural forces, because their mind is not very well developed. After all, Java's nature is bountiful and relieves the Javanese of the hard work and the need to develop their mind (i.e. he is lazy). Nevertheless, Harthoorn goes on, the Javanese were able to notice that weather and wind, water and fire had an influence on their wellbeing. They also noticed the interplay of natural forces and the unity of heaven and earth. Although all this must have pointed at a single principle force -i.e. *Danbjang toewa*- the Javanese did not dare to approach it, but instead worshipped its servants: sun, moon, rain, rivers, mountains, etc. Places where the life force of nature reveals itself most obviously (like luscious trees) were considered most suited

for worship of these natural forces, who through time were personified as spirits (Harthoorn 1860: 114-17). Harthoorn explains ancestor worship in a similar vein: although the Javanese recognises that his life is at the mercy of higher forces, he does not truly understand this. Therefore, because he has received comfort and protection from his parents throughout his life, and since his deceased parents still live in his memory, it seems to him that their spirit still surrounds him during times when he manages to get out of difficult situations. From this, Harthoorn conjectures, the idea was born that the deceased lovingly remember the living and help them. The same applies for the idea of a village guardian spirit, village founder spirit and ancestral spirits (*ibid.*: 118-19).

The way, according to Harthoorn, the Javanese mixed beliefs from different religions, ties in with the theme of degeneration as already touched upon in the chapters before. The original, natural Javanese religion focuses on *ngelmu* (here taken as *rapal* or formula) and ceremony, as it is preoccupied with placating spirits and ancestors. Therefore, of each new religion the simple formula that contained the basic ideas of that religion were treated as incantation formula. Consequently, Mohammedanism degenerated into *ilmoe santrijan* with its concomitant ceremonies. Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Shivaism underwent the same treatment and became *ilmoe peling*, *ilmoe banjoe bening* (*ilmoe ngare*), and *ilmoe goe-noengan* respectively. The end result of all this is a Javanism existing of crude nature and ancestor worship mixed with Hindu and Islamic components. Or, as Poensen has it, these religions are only practised exteriorly because their doctrines have been turned into mere formula (e.g. Poensen 1865: 167-68).

However, the final cause for Javanese syncretism is the quietist, passive nature of the Javanese. Harthoorn explains this by reference to the natural law of inertia which, according to him, also applies to the human mind (Harthoorn 1860: 246-47, cf. Poensen 1865: 179). This law knows of two forms, movement and rest. The first is dominant in the West, whereas the second is dominant in the East. Harthoorn had already claimed that Java's lush nature enticed this passivity in the Javanese, which was subsequently encouraged by despotic rule. The bloatedness of the Javanese is apparent in both his manner of reasoning and in the way he learns. Reasoning is comparing. But for the Javanese, comparing thoughts demands too much effort. Therefore, the Javanese simply

compares the sounds of words. When learning, the Javanese contents himself with thoughtlessly repeating the formula of his *guru*. Investigating what has been learned also asks too much effort. Therefore, more knowledge is not more insight, but simply gathering more *ngelmu* from many *guru*'s. This laziness or quietism explains why each religion that arrived in Java degenerated. From Brahmanism and Buddhism only the poetical superficial consequences were retained, the deeper theoretical side was discarded as too difficult. From Shivaism only the sensual aspects were retained, not the deeper search for the first cause. Mohamadanism shared the same fate: for the Javanese it was too much of a task to elevate himself to the teaching of a personal living God, who cares for mankind by sending prophets, who is holy and just and administers justice in the next life. Again, he contents himself with learning a couple of new formulas and ceremonies.

#### 5.1.4. Javanism as a piece of Protestant Theology

Harthoorn's treatment of Javanese Islam serves as the perfect illustration of Scholten's explanation and comparison of religions. It also is an excellent example of an ethnographer finding and describing the evidence that proves his pet-theory on religions. In this case the theory is Protestant theology.

One of the major consequences of this observation is that, as a concept, Harthoorn's Javanism, i.e. the indigenous, animist religion of the Javanese, is actually a piece of Protestant theology. We cannot reproach Harthoorn for his belief and faith in God. He is after all a missionary<sup>55</sup>. This, however, does not imply that his 'facts' prove anything about Javanism. Consider the following: On what basis should we, as scientists, accept Harthoorn's facts as empirical evidence? After all, his argument is purely theological. It assumes, amongst other things, the universality of religion -i.e. each human has the capacity for religious experience. Therefore, structurally his argument is identical to the one we have heard in the chapters before. Instead of God giving religion to each man, now

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<sup>55</sup> There were in fact amongst Harthoorn's colleagues missionaries who lost their faith and became freethinkers (*vrijdenkers*), such as T.A.F. van der Valk and D.J. ten Zeldam Ganswijk, who both left the mission as a consequence (Boone 1997: 37).

man has the innate capacity to religion. Now, different religions are no longer deviations from the true path, but different reactions (lower-higher, primitive-evolved) to a religious experience found in each human being. Consequently, we cannot accept Harthoorn's 'facts' as empirical evidence for the existence of Javanism. After all, these facts are not self-evident, but rest upon a theological framework. In other words, Harthoorn's 'discovery' of 'Javanism' was made possible by a theoretical framework that is essentially theological. The empirical 'facts' Harthoorn relies on to argue for 'Javanism' are only facts within this theory. A case in point is how 'Javanism' (and 'Javanese Islam') are conceived of as symmetrical to Christianity. For such a construction the missionaries turned to the religious beliefs and practices they held as central to Javanese religion: *ngelmu* and *slametan*.

## 5.2. Structuring concepts: belief and practice

In the following paragraphs I will add more substance to the claim that the concept of a syncretist Javanese religion -be it Javanism or Javanese Islam- is a piece of Christian theology. I will focus on the Javanese religious beliefs and practices as identified and described by the missionaries. As we will see, the missionaries' understanding of *ngelmu* and *slametan* turns Javanese religion into a pale variant of Christianity. *Ngelmu*, understood as a degenerated kind of doctrine, and *slametan*, as a primitive sacrifice, become the structuring concepts of 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism'.

In the following paragraphs, I will portray, in a very rudimentary way, how subjects such as Christ, doctrines, sacrifices, Lord's supper and Eucharist are conceived of within Christian, mostly Protestant, theology. When in the previous chapter we touched upon the theological schism running through the Protestant landscape during the 19th century, we found that, roughly speaking, there was a more orthodox, pietist faction and a more intellectualist, anti-supernaturalist faction. The latter was exemplified in Harthoorn. Most of the other missionaries appear to have been quite more moderate than he was, especially the 'older' generations. Therefore, while Modern Theology for example questions the status of Christ as the actual son of God, many missionaries firmly believed He

was. However, for the subject at hand, such theological differences are relatively unimportant. While the missionaries obviously had different (theological) opinions about the true nature of Christ, salvation, Lord's supper etc. and about the role of these in Christian, i.e. Protestant faith, they did agree about doctrines and rituals being central to Javanese religion. As we will see, they use Christian theological concepts -on which they would of course disagree as to the correct meaning and desired role in their own faith- as blueprints for the conceptualisation of *ngelmu* and *slametan*. In the following paragraphs, when expounding on certain Christian, Protestant theological concepts, I will use the viewpoint of the more moderate even orthodox faction.

#### 5.2.1. Javanese beliefs: *ngelmu*

We should keep in mind that the descriptions of *ngelmu* were generated as part of the proselytising effort of the Protestant missionaries. Missionaries like Jellesma and Brückner had come to Java to bring the Gospel, that is the good message that Christ had given his life, sacrificed himself on the cross, to take away the sins of Mankind. By converting and becoming a true believer, one could join the Christian community and benefit from the blessings of Christ's sacrifice. In order to convert the Javanese, the missionaries intended to convince them of the superiority of the Christian faith. Of course, the putative superiority of one religious belief is relative to the inferiority of another. Therefore, it was essential for the missionaries to uncover the religious beliefs of the Javanese and in the end they located them in the *ngelmu* of the Javanese.

Both Harthoorn and Poensen identify *ngelmu* -or *ilmu*- as the doctrines or beliefs of the Javanese, even though the way the Javanese themselves speak of *ngelmu* seemed to have little to do with belief. Consider the many kinds of *ngelmu*: there is an *ngelmu* for stealing a chicken without getting caught, one for guarding one's house from a fire, one for predicting one's death and even delaying it. There are *ngelmu* in the form of a riddle, somewhat resembling a *koan*: "What is better: to fear Allah or to dare to stand up to him?" or "Who is the father of Allah?" (Harthoorn



1860: 216)<sup>56</sup>. Each *ngelmu* has its own name and own *rapal* (formula). Knowing and being able to utter the words of the *rapal* suffices to unleash its power. After all, the *rapal*'s phrases, originally drawn from Javanese or Arabic, have been corrupted so badly, it becomes impossible to understand them. Usually, then, a Javanese does not understand the *rapal* language and attaches any meaning to it that occurs to him at that moment. Some *ngelmu* are even attributed different effects and powers by different people (Poensen 1864: 247-49). Therefore, from the accounts of Harthoorn and Poensen themselves, it is apparent that the Javanese used *ngelmu* in a very practical manner. From the prosaic *ngelmu* for stealing a chicken to the spiritual *ngelmu*, the Javanese in the missionary accounts apply *ngelmu* in a practical, pragmatic way and do not treat them as containing theological or doctrinal knowledge.

Still, Harthoorn and Poensen describe *ngelmu* as the false beliefs of the Javanese. Harthoorn uses the theological term *weetheiligheid* (which translates roughly as 'holiness through knowledge') to express the idea that the Javanese falsely believe that they can obtain holiness through this kind of knowledge:

“[it is] that sad erring and blindness of the mind [...], whereby the sin of hell disguises itself in the garb of heaven!” (Harthoorn 1860: 213)<sup>57</sup>

Poensen, just like Harthoorn, singles out the phenomenon of *ngelmu* as the axis of Javanese religious life. It purportedly contains the principles of faith and the ethics of the Javanese:

“The Ngelmu is actually the bond which ties man to God; its possession, its practise is the religious life of the Javanese. Through Ngelmu the Deity makes itself known to man, shows its presence, its help, its power, and its solace. The dogmatics and the morals of the Javanese are embraced within the Ngelmu. It contains the

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<sup>56</sup> My translation of: “... wat is beter Allah te vreezen of aan te durven?” and “... wie is de vader van Allah?”

<sup>57</sup> My translation of: “[het is] die treurige afdwaling en verblinding des geestes [...], waarbij de zonde der hel zich momt in het kleed des hemels!”

treasures of devoutness for this and the next life.” (Poensen 1864: 246)<sup>58</sup>

Harthoorn goes as far as claiming that *ngelmu* is to the Javanese what the Gospel is to the Christians. As Harthoorn has it, possessing many *ngelmu* means to the Javanese the same as being pious, virtuous, and God-fearing to Christians (Harthoorn 1860: 213). In other words, they conceive of *ngelmu* as a watered-down version of Christian beliefs. Both Harthoorn and Poensen use this concept of *ngelmu*, understood as belief, to describe the Javanese religious condition. For the first *ngelmu* is of pivotal importance in making sense of the syncretist character of Javanese religion. For the second *ngelmu* allows him to discern the different sects in the Javanese religious landscape.

### *Ngelmu* and syncretism

Of all the *ngelmu* out there, Harthoorn focuses on the four he considers most influential on the Javanese mind and traces them back to their religion of origin (ibid.: 218 ff.). Firstly, the *ilmoe peling* (or *ilmoe kraton*) is the knowledge that enables one to receive a *kraton* (palace) in the next birth. This *ngelmu* deals with conscious living, a type of reflection that induces a kind of fatalism. Its impact is revealed in typical Javanese ways of speaking and a generally shared worldview (*beschouwingswijze*). According to Harthoorn the *ilmoe peling* is derived from Brahmanism. Secondly, the *ilmoe ngare* (or *ilmoe banjoe bening*) which teaches that true knowledge is not to be found by observing the visible, but that everything that exists is all inside man and it does not really exist. It concerns the knowledge of not-being. The result of this knowledge is a kind of equanimity which, according to Harthoorn, expresses itself as a lack of love, as indifference, and passivity. This *ngelmu* is Buddhist in origin. Thirdly, the *ilmoe goenoengan* which deals with fertility, and hence implies the reverence of male genitalia. This *ngelmu* teaches that life comes from death, which equates nature with destruction. This kind of reasoning has made the

<sup>58</sup> My translation of: “De Ngelmoe is eigenlijk de band, welke den mensch met God verbindt; haar bezit, hare beoefening is het godsdienstig leven der Javanen. Door de Ngelmoe maakt de Godheid zich kenbaar aan den mensch, betoont zij haar aanzijn, hare hulp, hare magt en hare vertroosting. In de Ngelmoe zijn de dogmatiek en moraal der Javanen begrepen. Zij bevat de schatten der godzaligheid voor dit en het volgend leven.”

Javanese doubtful and passive (again according to Harthoorn). It is Shivaist in origin. Fourthly, the *ilmoe santrijan* contains many *dowa* (*donga*, prayer), *sadad* (*shabada*, confession of faith), talisman and *ilmoe kamodongan* (interpreted as magic by Harthoorn), many Arab-Israelite and rabbinic stories translated into Javanese, and many philosophical-theological expressions and proverbs. This *ngelmu* is drawn from Islam and is regarded as opposite to *ilmoe paseq*, or the *ngelmu* of the unbelievers, the three above mentioned *ngelmu* which are of indic origin.

The *ilmoe santrijan*, or “Javanese Mohammedanism” as Harthoorn calls it at one point (ibid.: 251), is the way the Javanese have accommodated Islam. They turned Islamic formula of faith into *ngelmu*. Harthoorn observes, that those Javanese who are ignorant of the content of the Qur’an do not care about knowing the formula in its entirety nor correctly, but only care about knowing many *ngelmu*. In Harthoorn’s eyes, the *ilmoe santrijan* or Javanese Islam is not the pure teaching of Islam. After all, many *santri* behave as sinners and heretics and their religious knowledge is defunct.

By discerning these four *ngelmu* or beliefs, Harthoorn attempts to get to the core of Javanism. The Javanese added what they thought to understand from Brahmanism, Buddhism, Shivaism, and Islam to their already existing body of beliefs and practices -just as the Christian Javanese were doing with Christianity. By categorising them according to their different supposed religious origins, Harthoorn was able to make sense of the *ngelmu* of Javanese villagers. Furthermore, it is this mixing of beliefs that strictly speaking could not be mixed that is captured with the term ‘syncretism’. This way, Harthoorn ties in with the received wisdom that the Javanese adhere to beliefs and practices from different religious descent. Once identified, the different *ngelmu* could serve as proof for the ‘fact’ that the Javanese adhered to a syncretist religion, in which doctrines or beliefs of different descent went hand in hand.

### *Ngelmu* and Javanese sects

Poensen uses the concept of *ngelmu* to differentiate between different Javanese sects according to the degree their doctrines, i.e. the remnants of Buddhism, Brahmanism and Shivaism, or other ‘-isms’ deviate from Islam. He makes a basic distinction between sects of unbelievers and sects of believers -this latter group representing the ordinary Javanese Muslims.

To Poensen, unbelievers are those Javanese that deny the existence of a deity. Apparently they come in different forms, so he distinguishes them according to the *ngelmu* they adhere to (Poensen 1864: 217 ff.). Firstly, there is the *tijang paseq* (the unbelieving people) who profess the *ngelmoe paseq*. They are found all over Java, although they are not connected by any external mark nor by any particular place. The only thing they have in common is their being “*paseq*”, i.e. unbeliever. They adhere to a crude pantheism, or even a complete denial of the existence of a deity. In their system there is no talk of Allah, it is man who made Allah. Therefore, eat and drink and be happy, for tomorrow we die! With death all ends. There are no religious ceremonies, they truly are without religion. Secondly, the *tapa* or *adjar* (hermits) who profess the *ngelmoe adjar*. Although they do not deny the existence of a deity, their distinguishing belief is one in reincarnation. Leading a hermit’s life means to eat, drink, and sleep as little as possible so as to the kill the sensuous part of the human existence. This will ensure a reincarnation into a higher social level (e.g. the son of a *bupati*). Thirdly, the *santri birahi* is a sect to which santri’s belong. They mimic the *santri leres* (true santri) in their clothing and hair dress. They gamble a lot and keep the company of dancing girls, they neglect religious practices, they claim that heaven and hell are on this earth, and that there is no resurrection of the dead. They speak a lot about *weda* and *wedadari’s* (ghosts and divine creatures). Their *ngelmu* is the *ngelmu santri birahi*. Fourthly, the sect adhering to the *ngelmoe doel* believes in the Allah of Mohammed, but neglects Mohammed’s precepts and holds different religious ceremonies. They too believe in reincarnation.

In Poensen’s scheme, the believers are those Javanese that (claim to) follow Mohammed and to a greater or lesser degree honour his commandments. Contrary to Harthoorn, Poensen does not explicitly state the *ngelmu* the Javanese muslims adhere to. However, he describes them as

the great multitude of the Javanese, who have their children circumcised at the age of thirteen, who give *slametans*, perform religious ceremonies, and detest all who eat pork and are not circumcised. This is the common man who lives in the *desa*. However, according to Poensen, the religious consciousness of the common Javanese is not well developed. Most of them know how to pronounce the *Shabada*, but they are not faithful to this confession. For example, although the Javanese speak of Allah as the one who has predestined the world, they do not reflect upon what happens in the world, in order to look for and understand Allah's will. On the contrary, Allah's will is used as an argument to stop any reflection whatsoever. Moreover, the Javanese do not have a personal relation with the Almighty, but do worship and honour many different gods and spirits. Such gods and spirits include the *Dan-hjang-Desa*, the spirit that guards the *desa*; the *ratoe demit*, the spirit that guards the city; the spirit of a *sawah*; *Tjakal bakal-desa*, the founder of a *desa*. As it turns out, the Javanese "believers" are unable to say whether these spirits are higher or lower than Allah. Neither do they know the relationship between e.g. the *Dan-hjang-desa* and the *Tjakal bakal-desa*, sometimes they are considered the same. The deceased are honoured as well, especially during Ramadan, as are certain mythological persons. Then, there are ghosts, *dena's*, *midadari's*, *ib-lis*, angels, etc. According to Poensen, the Javanese consider all these entities to be holy and each plays a part in a ceremony and/or has one dedicated to it. These often include the *Shabada* in the form of a *rapal*, and commonly a *kyai* or *modin* is required to recite it. One of the main Javanese ceremonies is the *slametan*, to which we turn our attention now.

### 5.2.2. Javanese religious practice: *slametan*

As we saw, Harthoorn describes *ngelmu* as *weetheiligheid*: i.e. the false belief that possessing certain knowledge makes that person holy. It is accompanied by equally theological term *werkeiligheid*, i.e. "holiness through certain deeds" (Harthoorn 1860: 239ff.)<sup>59</sup>. With this term Harthoorn describes the Javanese religious ceremonies as vain attempts of the Javanese

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<sup>59</sup> *Weetheiligheid* en *werkeiligheid* are Protestant theological terms denouncing the erroneous ways through which people hope to attain grace. These charges are most often directed to adherents from 'competing' religions.

nese to satisfy mankind's innate desire for redemption. Most of these, according to Harthoorn, involve sacrifices. There are many, many rituals which have to be carried out meticulously. The Javanese has to mind the proper days and times when to make the specific sacrifices, he has to arrange the appropriate meals, reserve some dishes on specific spots for this or that spirit, he has to burn incense, etc. The graves of the ancestors must be kept clean, have to be visited at specific times and decorated with flowers as a tribute. Negligence in any of these practices could provoke the anger and wrath of the spirits. In this vast repertoire of rituals, Islam has simply added some new customs to the old ones: circumcision, pilgrimage to graves of the Javanese Islamic saints (*Wali*), ablutions, the 5 daily prayers,... Of all these religious rituals, Harthoorn describes the *slametan* as the one that is most common to the Javanese. It involves the offering of food to e.g. Adam, Eve, or the spirit of the village founder (Harthoorn 1857: 191 fn. 3). Poensen too singles out the *slametan* as the most common form of sacrifice in Java (Poensen 1866: 44). Similar to Harthoorn, he claims that sacrifices such as the *slametan*, albeit crude and degenerated, indicate that the Javanese seek salvation too, just like their more evolved Protestant brethren.

### **The Eucharist and Lord's Supper as an expression of belief**

Poensen's and Harthoorn's take on the *slametan* makes all the more sense when we consider the role the Lord's Supper (or the Eucharist as it is known in Catholicism) in Christianity. The importance of this ritual, its meaning, and the centrality of it is completely determined by belief. Regardless of their denomination, Catholic or Protestant, all Christians consider it a 'memorial action' of the last supper of Jesus and his apostles (Eucharist 2014). Christians believe that when Jesus died at the cross, He made a sacrifice by which he took away the sins of mankind<sup>60</sup>. This is believed to be the new covenant between God and man by which God has inscribed his laws into the heart of mankind -instead of the old covenant, i.e. the Ten Commandments, that were inscribed onto two

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<sup>60</sup> Obviously this point is a debated one. I have touched upon the theological differences in 19th century Dutch Protestant theology above. It is safe to state that the adepts of Modern Theology, being anti-supranaturalist would have difficulty accepting this description of Christ, which of course also affects their understanding of the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

stone tablets. The meaning of the ritual is so important that, in fact, one could delineate the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism, and between different Protestant denominations according to their diverging interpretations and understandings of it.

Take the act of sharing bread and wine, which is at the heart of the ritual. In some instances it's only bread, in some instances the wine is replaced with unfermented grape juice or water, depending on the interpretation of the relevant texts in the Gospel. For many Christian denominations, e.g. in Catholicism and Lutheranism, this shared food is believed to be the actual body of Christ. By partaking in the ritual, i.e. by eating the body of Christ, the participants, who must be true believers, enter into a communion with Christ and one another. Through this communion they enjoy the effects of Christ's sacrifice, meaning that they have received the grace of God. Other denominations, however, such as Baptism, do not take the Lord's Supper to be a channel of grace. Instead of a sacrament, Baptists see it as an ordinance: something that Christ ordained, and thus as a remembrance of Christ's sacrifice and an expression of the grace that has already been received from God. The shared food therefore is not thought to be the body of Christ, and eating it does not mean one eats the body of Christ literally, but only spiritually -which equals trusting with heart and soul upon the mercy and goodness of God. The Lord's Supper then becomes a meditation on the truth of the Gospel. This very rudimentary sketch shows us two things relevant to the story at hand.

Firstly, it shows how certain beliefs that underlie the ritual of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper are essential to a proper understanding of it. The differences in the underlying beliefs are expressed in the rituals themselves. Take for example what exactly is consumed; or whether foot washing is or is not a part of the ritual; or whether it is necessary to consecrate the food items; etc. The presence or absence of these elements in the ritual depends on accompanying beliefs and ultimately upon a particular understanding of the Gospel. Therefore, if one wants to understand this ritual, in any of the forms it exists, one needs to turn to these underlying beliefs. Moreover, to those who partake in the ritual, belief is crucial as well. After all, one must understand and believe that Christ's sacrifice is the new covenant in order to receive the blessing or grace the ritual channels. Even in those instances where the Lord's Supper is con-

sidered an ordinance and is thus conceived as a reminder of and reflection on the truth of the Gospel, belief in that truth is obviously essential. Consequently, the ritual of the Lord's Supper expresses the belief that Jesus Christ died for the sins of mankind, etc. This is what it means for a ritual to express a belief, or how a religious practice can be taken for an expression of a belief.

Secondly, it shows that the way the missionaries made sense of the *slametan* is analogous (ore symmetrical) to the way one would make sense of the Lord's supper: as an expression of religious beliefs. Very simply put, the Javanese sacrifice, as is evidenced in the *slametan*, expresses the Javanese belief in spirits, and their devotion to them. However, this devotion is degenerated, and so is the *slametan*. After all, it is directed to the deceased, the ancestors, the saints, to Adam, Eve, spirits and deities and to such "indefinite notions" as the directions of the wind, the earth, and the heavens (*hemel*), even to Mohammed but almost never to Allah -not even when the *modin* or *santri* are present (Poensen 1866: 43-46). The objective is usually to placate some spirit(s), thank an ancestor, or obtain some physical of material benefit. However, as Poensen argues, a pure sacrifice should be directed to the one and only God who created heaven and earth, while its objective should be forgiveness of sins.

### The *slametan* as a piece of Christian theology

Despite the above description being very concise and necessarily superficial, we do notice how the understanding of *slametan* is executed from an theological perspective. To the Protestant missionaries, Christ's death at the cross is the perfect sacrifice, and the only one that really counts. Since then every sacrifice is actually in vain -that is why the Lord's Supper is considered either a re-enactment or a commemoration and not a sacrifice. Consequently, the Javanese *slametan*, is seen as the way the Javanese answer to their innate yearning for God (they too are capable of religion after all). It is, however, also proof of the degenerate, unevolved, primitive state of the Javanese: this sacrificial meal is not even directed to Allah, but to spirits, ancestors etc. Here too, we see how the very first descriptions of *slametan* -identical to the ones we have today- are a piece of Christian theology.



### 5.2.3. Summary

In the previous paragraphs we have seen how the concepts of 'belief' and 'practice', in the guise of *ngelmu* and *slametan*, structure the descriptions of 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism'. As had already been established in previous chapters, without these two concepts our current understanding of religion in Java would not be possible. It is the merit of missionaries such as Harthoorn and Poensen to have larded with ethnographic detail the structures set out by their predecessors. It is striking how in their descriptions both *ngelmu* and *slametan* are modelled after Christian theological concepts. In the end a *ngelmu* is taken for an illogical religious belief or doctrine and the *slametan* as a kind of inferior sacrificial meal. Secondly, the relationship between religious belief and religious practice is seen as follows: the latter is an expression of the former; or the former is the motivation for the latter. For example, the *slametan* is described as expressing the belief of ancestor worship and worship of nature (animism). Alternatively, the belief in the agency of deceased ancestors or spirits and gods is said to motivate the execution of the many Javanese rituals. However, as I will argue in chapter seven and eight, there is little evidence to corroborate this take on *ngelmu* and *slametan*. Of interest here is that the concepts around which 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' have been structured are, again, theological concepts. And, in the process, Javanese religion has been constructed as symmetrical to Christianity: Javanese Islam has doctrines too, Javanese central rituals express religious beliefs too. Thus, not only does it take a theological framework for the these twin concepts to make sense, it also takes theological concepts to construct them. On the basis of the above paragraphs, then, I would suggest that both syncretist 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' are pieces of Christian theology.

### 5.3. On misrepresentation: theology and post-colonialism

In these last two chapters I have described how for the first time the religion of the Javanese is referred to with the terms 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism'. As early as the 1860s these concepts are defined in a manner identical to the descriptions we find in contemporary scholarly accounts on Java. I have argued that the 19th century CE missionaries were the

first ethnographers in Java. Their accounts are but a link in the larger genealogy of 'Javanese Islam', as on the one hand their own descriptions of Javanese religion built upon the previous understanding and on the other hand served as building blocks for future understanding of the same phenomena. A first indication was the recurrence of the same familiar themes. Moreover, we found a significant continuity in both the structuring concepts with which and the conceptual framework within which 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' had been described.

Lastly, I have argued that the concepts 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' are actually pieces of Christian theology. They have a demonstrable place in Protestant theology, i.e. the theology the missionaries adhered to. Moreover, they were conceptualised in analogy to Christian religion: *ngelmu* was conceptualised as doctrines or beliefs, and *slametan* as a religious ritual, albeit crude and degenerate. All this leads to an racist depiction of the Javanese Muslims: they must be either plain hypocrites or mentally inferior. Perhaps such a stance was defensible within the theology of the day, it certainly is not within the scientific framework of today's Javanese Studies. It should come, then, as no surprise that syncretist 'Javanese Islam' (or 'Javanism', 'abangan religion' etc.) has come under attack. In the paragraphs below I will sketch the current, prevalent critique on the concept of syncretist 'Javanese Islam' and the proposed alternative.

### 5.3.1. Syncretist Javanese Islam: colonial invention or confining theology?

In the previous chapters we have already devoted some attention to the post-colonial stance that the misrepresentation inherent to the Western representation of Javanese Islam is a function of the colonial power structure. In short, this argument has it that orientalists, i.e. scholars in the service of colonial government, wilfully misrepresented Javanese religion. It is argued that these orientalists downplayed the Islamic essence of Javanese Islam in order to further colonial interests. Especially after the Diponegoro war the colonial concept of syncretist Javanese Islam is said to have been developed as a counterweight for the ever lurking dangers of Islamic uprising against the colonial hegemony. Thus, the Java-

nese *kraton* (especially those of Yogyakarta and Surakarta) were, by the same orientalists, set up as bulwarks of Hindu-Buddhist culture against the Islamic *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school). The first was depicted as the true nature of Java, Javanese culture and Javanese religiosity, and was pitted in a binary opposition to the second, portrayed as a force essentially alien to Java. Syncretist Javanese Islam therefore became characterised as essentially not Islamic, as only Islamic on the outside, or as a thin veneer of Islam (e.g. Florida 1997).

There is a lot of truth to this story: the Dutch were indeed afraid of Islamic uprisings. They perceived Islam as a constant threat. Especially radical Islam (zealots, as the Dutch would have it) was thought of as something in essence alien to Java and Javanese culture. It was being imported by the *hajji* and the *tarekat* (Sufi brotherhoods). One can imagine that the Dutch would have found it beneficiary to have an accomplice in a 'not-so-Islamic' Javanese aristocracy that could sway the Javanese population. Does this prove that syncretist Javanese Islam was willfully imagined by the orientalists of the day? I would say there are two main reasons to argue that it doesn't. Firstly, the post-colonial explanation cannot account for the role the missionaries have played in the crystallisation of the twin concepts 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism'. The main motivation of the missionaries was to proselytise and the consolidation of colonial hegemony seems to have been of only secondary importance at best. Even if one would argue that the missionaries deliberately portrayed the Javanese as superficial muslims in order to be allowed to proselytise, then this would not save the post-colonial argument. On the one hand, this argument would be but an auxiliary hypothesis to the post-colonial one, reducing the explanatory power of the latter. On the other hand, the missionary argument does not match the chronological facts: the missionaries had already been allowed in the field before the concepts 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' had been coined. And, the reason they had been allowed was that the already existing communities of Javanese Christians were living peacefully together with the Javanese Muslims. Which in turn was taken as proof that proselytisation was possible without unnerving Muslim sensibilities. Summarising, the post-colonial explanation of the origin of the misrepresentation of Javanese religion cannot account for the missionaries' role in the conceptualisation of 'Javanese Islam'. Secondly, the way it misrepresents -the way the concept of a syncretist Javanese religion is structured, how it received its

intelligibility- cannot be explained with reference to the colonial power structure either. There simply is no necessary connection between colonial hegemony on the one hand and syncretist 'Javanese Islam' on the other. So, while it is obvious that the concept of syncretist 'Javanese Islam' was at times used to further colonial interests, we have no indications that these interests lay at the origin of the concept.

At this point I would like to bring back to mind Werner Cohn's critique of anthropological descriptions of non-Western religions. As we saw in chapter one, an important point of his critique is that anthropologists identify non-Western religions along the lines of an observer's category, which he called *nacirema*. These *nacirema* involve actions or institutions that are recognised by the observer as salient and are consequently used to generate descriptions of non-Western religions. It is important to stress that it is the observer that invests these *nacirema* with this religious saliency and not the actual actor. The genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' I have sketched so far suggests that in the description of syncretist 'Javanese Islam', *ngelmu* and *slametan* are, as scholarly categories, observer's categories. That is, up to this point it is clear that Javanese Islam was recognised and described only by Western observers -travellers, orientalists, civil servants, missionaries. In this process, which spans several centuries, the Javanese voice was completely absent. Consequently, in these Western descriptions *ngelmu* and *slametan* are obvious instances of *nacirema*. After all, it was Western observers who endowed these phenomena with their religious saliency. It is here, if we follow Cohn's critique, that the observers implicitly switch categories: *ngelmu* and *slametan* factually belong to an observer's category, but are actually treated as instances of an actor's category<sup>61</sup>. In other words, *ngelmu* and *slametan* are described as, in Cohn's terminology, the "sacred institutions" of Javanese Islam in an identical manner as one would describe doctrines and the Lord's Supper as the "sacred institutions" of Protestantism. In the previous chapters I have spent considerable attention to the fact that Christian theology provided both the conceptual framework within which it makes sense to speak about a Javanese religion (be it 'Javanese Islam' or 'Javanism') and the structuring concepts with which these descriptions of this Javanese

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<sup>61</sup> We have seen this happening when e.g. Harthoorn claims that the Javanese does not know his own religious thoughts and it is actually up to a Western person to disclose these.

religion have been effectuated. This has been the main constant in the descriptions of Javanese religion we have discussed so far.

The localisation and description of Javanese Islam is part of larger enterprise in which a Western culture tried to come to terms with Javanese culture, a culture utterly alien to itself. Historically, Christianity has been intimately entwined with the development of Western culture. If we take a brief moment to consider the role of Christianity on European history, it is fairly self-evident that the Western culture was, and to a significant degree still is, a Christian culture. Just think of Christianity's influence on politics (e.g. the theocracies of the Middle Ages, the religious wars that scourged Europe during the 16th and 17th century), on social organisation (e.g. welfare systems, medical care, the calendar, holidays). The list is virtually endless. How then do these almost trivial facts relate to the story at hand, i.e. to the conceptualisation of a 'Javanese Islam'? One way of answering this question is to look at the terms or concepts available to members of a Western culture to make sense of a Javanese, i.e. non-Western, culture. Obviously, it could not do so with Javanese concepts, these being alien to the West. Then of course, it would do so with Western concepts. Considering, then, the huge influence of Christian theology on Western education and on the production and preservation of knowledge in the West, it is not a far stretch to find this conceptual reservoir of the West in Christian theology. Actually, this is indisputably the case until at least the Enlightenment period. Until what degree this remained the case after the Enlightenment, will have to remain an open question for the time being. For now, it suffices to recapitulate our observations from the previous chapters in the light of the above.

When Western travellers came to Java, they knew, even before setting one foot ashore, that their Christian God had implanted religion in the Javanese nation. This was a Biblical given, just like it was a Biblical given that the descendants of Noah had populated the entire earth. Therefore, the question was not and never has been whether the Javanese had religion, but only what religion they had. This question was answered soon enough: the Javanese were either Muslim or Heathen. Given the fact that Christian theological thought only allowed for a categorisation of humankind in four religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Heathenism) it should not surprise us that this neat categorisation of Javanese religiosity was skewed from the very beginning. We saw evidence of this in the

reservations Western observers made when it came to the way the Javanese practised Islam: from the very start Western observers raised doubts to the sincerity of Javanese faith in Islam; they thought of the Javanese as Muslim on the outside and Heathen on the inside; they were flabbergasted at the ease with which the Javanese had converted to Islam in the early 16th century or would convert to Christianity and back to Islam; and they were surprised to notice how the Javanese saw no bones in mixing rituals and beliefs from different, incompatible beliefs. All these observations (our “familiar themes”) are in fact descriptions of the experiences of Western observers, and all of these descriptions were structured around a very limited repertoire of theological concepts. As we saw, the only true evolution these descriptions displayed over time was the details added to them. We witnessed the coming about of a loop between the Western experiences of Java and the descriptions of these experiences (i.e. making sense of these experiences). The latter, in turn, provided the structuring concepts for ‘new’ experiences, which in turn were described and thus made sense of. This loop is evidence of the confines within which the West experienced and described Java, Javanese culture and religion and these confines, I suggest, were theological in nature. After all, at no point in the genealogy of ‘Javanese Islam’ has the representation of Javanese religion exceeded the following confines: 1) every nation has its religion, therefore the Javanese must have too; 2) religious practice expresses religious beliefs. It is a direct result of these confines that the Javanese have been portrayed as religious syncretists. With all the epistemological consequences involved.

Summarising, the post-colonial observation that syncretist ‘Javanese Islam’ is a misrepresentation of the Javanese religious condition is as correct as it is apt. However, the origin of the misrepresentation does not lie in the Western desire for colonial hegemony, as the post-colonial scholars would have it. Rather, it lies in the restricting confines of the Western, Christian theological conceptual apparatus. Within these confines ‘Javanese Islam’ was the only way the West was able to make intelligible a cultural reality that was from the very first instance utterly alien to it. In fact, we could read the conceptual genealogy of ‘Javanese Islam’ as the inevitable crystallisation of an indigenous Javanese religion symmetrical to the familiar Western Christian one.

### 5.3.2. The post-colonial alternative: local Islam

If syncretist Javanese Islam is a misrepresentation, then what would be the alternative? As we saw, the critique on the concept of syncretist 'Javanese Islam' focused on the purported un-Islamic character of it. This has been countered by the claim that the Javanese are actually truly Muslim, albeit in a Javanese way. Here the concept of syncretist 'Javanese Islam' is exchanged for that of 'local Islam' or 'native Islam' (see e.g. Woodward 1989; Florida 1997). The latter concepts convey the idea that in Java Islam is *expressed* in a local, i.e. Javanese, way.

The basic argument that underpins this idea of a local, Javanese Islam has it that in the process of the Islamisation of Java, Islam in Java has assimilated many local, native elements. These elements range from 'mundane' things, such as architecture and clothing, to more 'elevated' aspects, such as religious rituals or spiritual doctrines.

An influential exponent of this line of reasoning is Mark Woodward's 1989 *Islam in Java: normative piety and mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* in which he attempts to show that Javanese traditional religion is in fact Islam. He makes a basic distinction between two variants of Islam in Java: normative Islam (i.e. orthodox, legalistic Islam) and Islam *kejawen* (i.e. Sufi mysticism). He sees both variants as different answers to the same "single set of questions concerning the way or ways in which Islam should be interpreted and acted upon" (Woodward 1989: 30). The first answer is to "reject any rite or belief that is not in accord with the strictest possible interpretation of monotheism" and the second is "to search out scriptural precedents and legal justifications for practices that, though not of Arabic or even Muslim origin, have come to hold promi-

ment positions in popular Islam” (ibid.: 228)<sup>62</sup>. Through these “interpretative strategies” (especially the latter), pre-Islamic cultural and religious practices and beliefs have become thoroughly Islamic. Woodward claims that the Islamisation of Java has been so profound that the Javanese outlook on the world (worldview) has become essentially Islamic. In order to further argue this, Woodward reverts to “axiomatic structuralism”. This involves the claim that in each culture there are a number of axioms or epistemological structures that shape the way people see the world. Religion plays an important role in the formulation and articulation of such cultural axioms. According to Woodward Javanese religion and society are Islamic, because certain aspects of Muslim doctrine have taken the place of those of Hinduism and Buddhism as the axioms of Javanese culture (ibid.: 4, 22-30, 248).

Besides the fact that this ‘theory’ of axiomatic structuralism is completely *ad hoc*, it is also a pertinent case of *petitio principii*. That is, it assumes that what it needs to prove, viz. that the phenomena it discusses

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<sup>62</sup> This echoes a well-established distinction between the attitude of reformist orthodox Islam and the traditionalist orthodox Islam towards certain pre-Islamic customs. The first regards such customs as innovations or corruptions (*bid'ah* and *keburafat*) of correct practice and belief. It aims to purify Islam in Java of these encroachments by means of a correct interpretation of Qur'an and Hadith. In Java the best known instance of this current is Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second largest Islamic mass organisation. The second deems such customs acceptable as long as they are in line with, or can be brought in line with the teachings of Islam. Here too the interpretation of Qur'an and Hadith is central to deciding what does and does not conflict with Islam. This approach is heralded by Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation (See e.g. Cederoth 1991).



are indeed instances of a local, i.e. Javanese, Islam<sup>63</sup>. We also see this circular argument in the work of Florida, when arguing that the “native Islam” of the Javanese is true Islam and not some Hindu-Buddhist worldview with a mere thin veneer of Islam (Florida 1997). One of her arguments is that the central-Javanese Surakartan *pujangga* (court poet) of the famous Yasadipura lineage were true Muslims, because they had all received a *santri*-education. However, despite the connotations of orthodoxy and piety the term *santri* carries today, in the days of the Yasadipura’s (almost the entire 18th and 19th century<sup>64</sup>) a *santri*-education was rather an eclectic matter. Besides the study of Islamic texts, students (i.e. *santri*) also learnt things such as magic spells, different meditation techniques, medicine, calculating auspicious times, judging krisses, ... i.e. different kinds of knowledge of which the character is all but self-evidently Islamic (Drewes 1925: 77-112). In other words, the truly Islamic nature (as opposed to syncretist) of the *santri* is a contested topic (see e.g. Day 1981: 167-91; Drewes 1925: 190; Kumar 1985; Pigeaud 1938: 572-74). Consequently, Florida is taking as proof, as evidence, that what actually needs to be proven, viz. that *santri*-education was truly Islamic in the day and age of the Yasadipura’s. The same thing happens when Woodward argues that Islam has become the organising principle, i.e. the axioms, of

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<sup>63</sup> Other criticisms include: the failure to acknowledge “important core historical-linguistic, social-structural, and other features which Javanese culture shares with other areas in the archipelago and in Southeast Asia more generally, areas which did not experience Islamic influence” (Lyon 1991: 821); the haphazard selection of Islamic texts to support his arguments, omitting any serious discussion of how (even whether) these texts have been received by his informants and whether and how they have contributed to “the shaping of their overt beliefs and religious or social practice”, and the refusal to consider alternative explanations to his own esoteric interpretations (Van Bruinessen 1989: 347-48); subpar anthropological fieldwork, an argument that is of “the heads-I-win-tails-I-win variety; whenever a trait lacks an unambiguous grounding in *shariah*, it can still be made fully Islamic by invoking Sufism”, and finally: “Throughout his discussion, Woodward offers the 'soft' conjecture that Javanese traits resemble Sufi Islamic traits; he largely avoids - but perforce implies - the 'hard' conjecture that Javanese traits are derived from and sustained by Sufi Islam. For example, on pp. 179-80: what we used to know as 'symbolism of the centre' is said by Woodward to be a 'literal' borrowing of Sufi *qutb* (...) There is no way, on Woodward's reasoning, to test such suggestions. Such a technique of interpretation offers nothing to modern anthropology, nor, ipso facto, to post-Geertz studies of Islam and Javanese culture” (Wilder 1992: 187).

<sup>64</sup> The Yasadipura’s: Yasadipura I (1729-1802), Yasadipura II, aka Ranggawarsita (?-1844) and Ranggawarsita II (1802-1873).

Javanese society and culture. Cultural and religious practices such as the *slametan*, magic, *wayang*, the reverence of saints; the concept of power and kingship; Yogyakarta palace architecture; meditation orders... all of which are commonly regarded as typically Javanese, become instances of Sufi theology in Woodward's account. However, in the absence of a sound and conclusive argumentation that shows whether and how these Javanese cultural and religious hallmarks have been derived from Sufi theology (cf. Van Bruinessen 1989; Wilder 1992), Woodward's explanation is nothing more than a circular argument. That is, once Woodward has decided that the whole of Javanese culture and religion is permeated with Sufism, he simply takes the examples listed above as self-evident proof -which they are not. In chapter seven we will discuss in more detail one of Woodward's arguments, the one that deals with *slametan*. What concerns us here, is the observation that the alternative proposed by these post-colonial critics of syncretist 'Javanese Islam' is not adequately argued and is thus not acceptable.

#### 5.4. Conclusion

What has our genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' delivered so far? We started our inquiry with two guiding questions. Firstly, why do scholars continue to talk about 'Javanese Islam', while it obviously cannot but misrepresent the Javanese religious condition? Secondly, if 'Javanese Islam' is indeed a misrepresentation, where does this concept come from?

To this second question we have now an answer. As their genealogy shows, 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' are the result of a Western project of coming to terms with Javanese cultural and religious reality. Two points are important. Firstly, these concepts did not just present themselves, they were not ready-made. There never was e.g. a Javanese informant explaining to Westerners, that the religion of the Javanese was or is Javanese Islam or Javanism -on the contrary. These concepts, then, only came about through a process that had already been on its way for several centuries when 'Javanism' and 'Javanese Islam' emerged. And, in fact, this process still continues today. Secondly, the concepts are pieces of Christian theology. That is, they make logically sense only within a theoretical framework that subscribes to certain key theological verities.

As we saw, the universality of religion and the civilisational evolution all cultures pass through, are two such verities. Consequently, once you take away these key assumptions, or this theological framework, it no longer makes sense to speak about syncretist Javanese Islam or Javanism. Yet, as we have seen, many scholars (who are not theologians) still do.

This brings us to the first question: why does this discourse still linger on, then? One part of the answer is that because of the longevity of the discourse, it has become common sense to speak of Javanese religion, and to speak of it in these terms. Another part of the answer lies in the fact that Western culture was and to a very large degree still is a Christian culture. This implies that concepts such as 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism', that are in origin pieces of theology, have through a process of secularisation become self-evident 'facts' in social sciences. It is impossible to thoroughly discuss this point within the confines of this dissertation. Therefore, I will limit myself to the following observation. Geertz's description of *abangan* religion is completely identical to Harthoorn's concept of Javanism. As we saw, Harthoorn's concept is embedded in Protestant theology. Universality of religion, civilisational evolution, religious practices express religious beliefs: these theological truisms are all explicitly part of that theological framework within which it makes sense to speak of syncretist Javanese religion. When Geertz discusses *abangan* religion as the indigenous animist religion of the Javanese he does not explicitly condone such a theological framework. However, I would suggest, this tapestry of theological concepts is actually still present in the background, in the form of a number of assumptions shared by members of the same Western culture. These assumptions guarantee the appeal to our common sense, thus providing Geertz' account with the necessary 'intuitive intelligibility'<sup>65</sup>.

Another way of looking at this issue is to consider the empirical and theoretical proof we actually have for the existence of a syncretist Javanese religion, be it Javanese Islam or Javanism. After all, one could argue, the apparent consistency in the observations of generations and generations of Westerners in Java is an indication that there is indeed an in-

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<sup>65</sup> For a thorough treatment of the double dynamic of religion, i.e. proselytisation and secularisation, and the relevance of this for Western culture and the social sciences, see Balagangadhara 1994.

digenous Javanese religion. That is, the concepts 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' might indeed be misleading representations of this religion, in which case we simply need to tweak these concepts in order to achieve a proper understanding.

However, the arguments 'proving' the existence of such an indigenous religion are, as we have seen, in fact theological arguments. Therefore, unless we want to convert to theology, we have no theoretical proof of an indigenous, syncretist Javanese religion. Neither do we have any empirical evidence of this religion. Consider for example how *ngelmu* was made sense of: it has been described as the doctrines or beliefs of a Javanese religion. On what basis has this been done? Only on the basis of the assumption that there is a Javanese religion, a 'fact' that is in the end a theological verity. In other words, there is nothing self-evident about the 'observation' that *ngelmu* are the religious beliefs of the Javanese, or that *slametan* is the central ritual of Javanese religion. Therefore, treating *ngelmu* and *slametan* as evidence of a syncretist Javanese Islam is in fact also an instance of *petitio principii*.

Consequently, the conceptual genealogy of syncretist 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' does not deliver theoretical and empirical evidence, but rather it shows the crystallisation of a *Gestalt*. Above I have argued how the description of the Javanese religious condition was from the very start built around certain themes and how these themes were rehashed time and again in each new generation of descriptions. As the loop between the descriptions of Javanese religion and the Western experience of the Javanese reality in these terms endures over the centuries, details are added, thus giving more substance to the original structure, while those elements that do not fit the scheme are increasingly filtered out. The result is a *Gestalt*, i.e. an entity in the experience of the West, and a corresponding concept in the discourse on Javanese culture and religion. However, it is not clear to what this concept refers to in Javanese reality. In other words, if 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' do not refer to an actual entity in Javanese reality, then what do they refer to? This question will be treated in chapter seven and eight when we discuss the possibility of alternative descriptions of *slametan*, *ngelmu* and *agama*.

All this, of course, does not deny that there is Islam in Java. Neither does it contradict the obvious fact that Islam in Java has certain traits -Java-

nese traits- one will not find in other Islamic regions. This is to a certain extent the point scholars such as Florida and Woodward are trying to make vis-a-vis the scholarly discourse on syncretist Javanese Islam. What then is the relevance of the Islamisation of Java to the story at hand? We will discuss this topic in the next chapter.



## 6. Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje: Sufism as a defence of Javanese Islam

### 6.1. A Heathen in Muslim garb

As we saw in the previous chapters, the concepts 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' carried with them the connotation that the Javanese were not truly Muslim. One typical expression of this idea is the claim that for the Javanese Islam is only an exteriority, while internally he is still a Hindu or a Heathen. A more colourful expression is the image of Islam as a garb with holes in it through which the original, animist religion peers out. Another classic expression is that for the Javanese Islam is but a thin layer of veneer. Platitudes such as these are bountiful in the literature on Java and its religion and in the 19th and 20th century obtained a certain mantra-esque quality. As we saw, post-colonial scholars have associated this kind of evaluation of Javanese Islam with the orientalist scholarship from the second half of the 19th century onwards. Consequently, it seems to have become part of the post-colonial agenda to rectify that situation by affirming the truly Islamic character of Javanese Islam by calling it a local or native Islam, i.e. a local expression of Islam. In this affirmation Sufism plays a pivotal role. Firstly, it is considered one of the main vehicles of Java's conversion to Islam. Secondly, Sufism is believed to be the actual source of many of the typical characteristics of Javanese Islam (e.g. Woodward 1989).

As argued in the previous chapters, the characterisation of Javanese Islam as a syncretist religion in fact owes much more to the presence of a Christian theological framework than to orientalist inventiveness. Moreover, it is an interesting case of irony that the first scholar to argue that Javanese Islam is actually truly Islamic and to put the importance of Sufism for Javanese Islam on the academic agenda was Christiaan

Snouck Hurgronje -arguably the epitome of Dutch orientalist scholarship<sup>66</sup>.

## 6.2. Snouck Hurgronje: orientalist scholar and orientalist advisor

Snouck Hurgronje's influence on the study of Islam can hardly be overstated. He is regarded as one of the founders of modern Islamic studies. According to Drewes (1957:4) he raised three important issues that influenced Islam studies fundamentally: 1) How did the system of Islam come into being? 2) What is the meaning of Islam to its confessors? 3) How to govern the Muslims so as to let them collaborate in the realisation of the ideal of a universal civilisation? This third question reveals his orientalist objective: the establishment of effective colonial rule over the Indonesian archipelago. Such colonial rule would actually be of benefit to the Indonesian population, according to Snouck Hurgronje, as it was still underdeveloped and in need of guidance. Moreover, Snouck Hurgronje also subscribed to the idea that all of mankind needs to pass through the same evolutionary stages. The second question is relevant to Snouck Hurgronje's understanding of Javanese Islam, as it is his point of departure in discussing it. And, the answer to the first question has it that indigenous cultural elements become incorporated into Islam each time Islam spreads to new areas. Thus, an essential commonality between, say, Egyptian and Javanese Islam is that both have incorporated cultural elements typical for their respective regions. Another important contribution of Snouck Hurgronje is his emphasis on the fact that the holy science of Islam consists of three elements that are equally important: the duties, the law and mysticism (*plichtenleer, geloofsleer, mystiek*) (ibid.: 13). This brought Islamic mysticism, i.e. Sufism, as a genuine research topic into the scholarly scope. His historical perspective on Islam was new at the time. As was his combination of philological expertise with anthropology. That is to say, he studied Islam not only from a theoretical perspective, but also as it was practised in daily life. His approach was truly groundbreaking and his influence is felt to this day.

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<sup>66</sup> In order to avoid confusion it is important to point out that Snouck Hurgronje does not speak about Javanese Islam. He speaks simply about Islam in Indonesia and in Java. It is however clear from the way he describes it that he is often referring to the same entity as I have discussed under the heading 'Javanese Islam' so far.



Besides an eminent scholar, Snouck Hurgronje was also an eminent advisor to colonial policy makers. He is without a doubt the perfect example of the orientalist whose knowledge and knowledge production directly served the consolidation and perpetuation of colonial hegemony. W.F. Wertheim, for example, criticised him for subordinating his ethical principles to the imperialistic motives of Dutch colonial policy (Graf 1980: 808-9). Through his close contacts with the Islamic elite in Mecca, Sumatra and Java he was able to gather valuable information<sup>67</sup>. Snouck Hurgronje's advice of how to root out the Acehnese resistance and apply 'pacification' by rule through an Acehnese sultanate originated directly from his thorough understanding of Islam and his scholarly research in Aceh itself. His 1893-94 two-volumed study *De Atjehers* (The Acehnese) is a direct result of the research commissioned by the Dutch government and is an apt testimony to orientalist knowledge in service of colonial rule. His recommendations to keep a close eye on Javanese *hajji's* who returned to Java; to allow freedom of religion; to keep a neutral state; to promote an Islam free of politics through modern, i.e. Western type, education were all based on his scholarly research, both textual and in the field.

Snouck Hurgronje was neither the first nor the only colonial advisor to emphasise the thoroughly Islamic character of the Indonesians. Another such colonial advisor, K. F. Holle (1829-1896), had already done so with regard to the Sundanese and successors such as G.A.J. Hazeu (1870-1929) continued to hold and propagate this same stance (Steenbrink 1993: 76-98; Van den Berge 1998). Simple facts such as these are important corrections to the all too common suggestion that the depiction of Indonesian and Javanese Islam as an impure, superficial Islam is an orientalist concoction. However, we will leave the post-colonial critique on

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<sup>67</sup> Snouck Hurgronje is said to have converted to Islam in order to obtain permission to enter Mecca. He adopted an Arabic alias, Abdul Ghaffar, and became accepted as a Muslim amongst Muslims. Notable amongst these relations was his friendship with Raden Abu Bakar Djajadin-ingrat who furnished Snouck Hurgronje with a lot of data concerning the daily life in Mecca and supported him connecting with the *Jawi* communities in Mecca (i.e. *hajji's* from the Malay archipelago). Moreover, the relations he struck in Mecca aided him greatly in his later researches in both Aceh and Java. Additionally, his letters of recommendation from Meccan Islamic teachers and his credentials as a great Muslim scholar served him well in establishing ties of trust with informants both in Aceh and Java. Van Heutsz would refer to this as "Snouck's oriental method" (*Snouck's Oosterse methode*) (Van Koningsveld 1988: 70-71, 91).

orientalist scholarship for what it is and shall now focus on Snouck Hurgronje's insights into Javanese Islam.

### 6.3. A timeline of textual knowledge and participatory observation

The combination of a very thorough scriptural knowledge of Islam with participatory observation in Mecca and Aceh is certainly central to Snouck Hurgronje's authoritative insights into Islam, and into Indonesian and Javanese Islam in particular. A brief, punctuated, overview of his main publications and fieldwork puts this claim into perspective.

Snouck Hurgronje's first major work was his dissertation, published in 1880 as *Het Mekkaansche feest* (The Meccan feast) which contains a discussion of the ritual central to the *Hajj*. Due to its novel central thesis -the origins of this Islamic feast are Heathen and not Judaic- and Snouck Hurgronje's mastery of scriptural sources made a deep impression on the arabist public (Drewes 1957; Pedersen 1957).

During the years 1884 and 1885 Snouck Hurgronje spent about 6 months in Jeddah and 6 months in Mecca under the alias of Abdul Ghaffar, which allowed him to engage in participatory observation. This trip sowed the seeds of his second major work, *Mekka* (Mecca), which appeared in 1888. The two-volumed book combines a textual discussion of Mecca and its importance for Islam and the Muslim world with insights drawn from Snouck Hurgronje's observations of the daily life in Mecca outside of the festival season. He describes and analyses the rituals and habits of the Muslims of Mecca. Amongst other things, it shows that even in Islam's holiest of cities, the behaviour and practices of the Muslims do not live up to the ideal that one finds in the scriptures (*Qur'an* and *Hadith*). This, however, does not affect their status as Muslim. Snouck Hurgronje also describes the "Djawi" (*Jawi*) community in Mecca, that is the community of *hajjis* from the Malay archipelago, mostly from Sumatra and Java. Many of these *hajjis* would stay for longer periods and would be initiated into *tariqas* or *tarekat*, i.e. Sufi mystical brotherhoods. Here, they would receive thorough Islamic education and upon return in their motherland, they would spread this acquired knowledge. Therefore, the *tarekat* were arguably the most important routes via which Islam reached Java, bringing both the mystical and legalist aspects

of Islam (e.g. Van Bruinessen 1994a; 1994b; Azra 2004). Snouck Hurgronje, who was advisor for indigenous affairs from 1889 to 1905, warned against the dangers of political Islam so often associated with the more fanatic *tarekat*. A well-known example is the Naqshbandi order, thought to be at the root of many social upheavals and whom Snouck Hurgronje had become quite familiar with since his time in Mecca (see Van Bruinessen 1990: 165 fn. 48). And although his general advice, based on his researches and experiences, was to interfere as little as possible in matters of religion, he recommended strict suppression of any form of political Islam.

From 1889 to 1906 Snouck Hurgronje moved to the Netherlands Indies with hopes of reforming colonial policy. He lived mainly in Buitenzorg (Bogor), in the Western, i.e. Sundanese, part of Java, where he researched Islamic education and taught Arabic at the Gymnasium Willem III in Batavia. During this period he was married twice -in both cases with Sundanese women from high-placed families (Van Koningsveld 1988: 130-41). His experience of the daily life of the Javanese must have been very limited as he seems to have socialised almost exclusively with members of the Sundanese religious elite. There was of course a trip of about 6 months through West and Central Java in 1889, during which he visited several *pesantran* (Islamic boarding school) where he collected religious writings (ibid.: 144, 169). This, however, hardly counts as participatory observation amongst the Javanese. In 1891 he was allowed to enter into Aceh for the first time, where at the time the Dutch government was fighting a tough and long war. Again under his Meccan alias Hajji Abdul Ghaffar, and using his connections from his time in Mecca, he researched the situation in the field. His advice to the military governor of Aceh, Van Heutsz, was essential to the eventual victory of the Dutch. In 1893-1894 the two volumed *De Atjehers* (The Acehnese) appeared, bearing a structure similar to his 1888 *Mekka*: the first volume is more textually oriented, while the second volume deals with observations from the field. In this second volume we find a lot of information, not only on Islam in Aceh, but also on Java. It discusses, amongst other things, the practice of the reverence of saints (such as the *Wali Sanga*) and the place of *ngelmu* in Javanese Islam. After Aceh, Snouck returned to Batavia where he continued his teaching and advisory occupations. In 1906, after Van Heutsz had decided to no longer follow his advice, Snouck Hurgronje returned to the Netherlands, leaving behind and breaking all

ties with his two Javanese families<sup>68</sup>. He became professor of Arabic at Leiden University.

#### 6.4. Snouck Hurgronje's yardstick: making Javanese Islam truly Islamic

As pointed out above, Snouck Hurgronje strongly opposed the idea that Javanese Islam is only superficially Islamic. As early as 1883 he had already developed his argument as how to understand (and how not to understand) the Islam of the Javanese (Snouck Hurgronje 1884). Much of his argument is directed specifically against the representation of Javanese Islam as a garb with holes, through which the half-Hinduised, Polynesian Heathen still peaks through (e.g. *ibid.*: 100, 103). This view, championed by authors such as Poensen and Brumund, he argues, betrays an utter lack of knowledge of Islam. It measures Javanese Islam, i.e. Islam as it is practiced by the Javanese, by standards derived from the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* (*ibid.*: 100-1). However, by applying this theoretical yardstick one will not find any Muslims in Java. In fact, Snouck Hurgronje argues, we would not find any Muslims anywhere. This is the frustration of the *faqih*s (the experts of Islamic law): virtually none of the Muslims follow the law to the letter. Even in Egypt, one of the major centres of Muslim science, the laws of purity (*reinheidswetten*) are violated, the five daily prayers are not respected, and the *zakat* (religious tax) is not upheld. Thus, by applying this theoretical yardstick neither the Javanese nor the Egyptians would qualify as Muslim, and therefore it is obvious that this is not an appropriate tool.

The practical yardstick, as applied by the Javanese themselves, will not do either. By only evaluating certain exterior characteristics, as do the Javanese, one cannot decide to what religious group someone belongs. In the eyes of the masses, having received the "sign of union" (*bondsteeken*, here probably meant as circumcision), dressing as Muslims do, abstaining from pork and wine, and hating *kajirs*, seems sufficient to consider someone a Muslim (*ibid.*: 102). Having learned their religion not from books, but by rudimentary education, it is understandable that the Javanese employ such standards. However, Snouck Hurgronje argues, while the theoretical yardstick is too strict, the practical is too lax.

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<sup>68</sup> He did leave a 5000 guilders heritage to each of his children (Van Koningsveld 1988: 137).

Snouck Hurgronje uses a comparative method instead: he evaluates the disposition (*gezindheid*) of the Javanese and compares it with the situation in other Muslim countries. Snouck Hurgronje takes the adherence of the Javanese to *tawhid*, the doctrine of the unity of Allah (i.e. Allah is the only god and Mohammed is his prophet) as his starting point. As many authors had claimed, even though the Javanese attest to the unity of Allah, they do not respect it in practice. After all, they also worship other deities and spirits, dedicate *slametans* to guardian spirits, visit the holy graves of saints, offer incense at holy trees and in their religious incantations they appeal to spirits (*djins*) and the like. However, according to Snouck Hurgronje, this does not mean that the Javanese are only Muslim outwardly and still Heathen in their heart. After all, similar practices occur in all of the Islamic countries. In fact, we can even discern such a detachment from the theoretical norm in Christian countries. Even in the time of Mohammed, Islam had to make concessions: was not the Meccan feast in origin a Heathen feast which had been Islamised and came to be at the heart of this religion? This, then, is what has happened to all these Javanese 'Heathen' beliefs and practices as well: they have been Islamised. These practices and beliefs belong to the popular belief (*volksgeleef*) of the gullible and illiterate masses, and is something educated, literate Muslims of course frown upon. However, this popular belief or "character of the people" cannot be simply rooted out, it has to be accommodated, that is Islamised. Consequently, through the intervention of *faqih*s -most of whom also share these popular superstitions- these practices and beliefs have been "smuggled" inside the official doctrines and dogmas. The *faqih*s arranged these alien additions in such a fashion that the greatness of Allah would not be degraded (ibid.: 103-6).

### The reverence of the *Wali Sanga*: Islamised popular religion

Snouck Hurgronje illustrates his point with the common Javanese practice of the reverence of the saints credited with spreading Islam over Java (*Wali Sanga*). The Javanese worship the *Wali* with the purpose of attaining prosperity and averting diseases or adversity. Similar objectives motivate the worship of village guardian spirits, ancestors, banyan trees, and certain stones or statues. Snouck Hurgronje agrees that, since such practices enjoy the same status as a prayer directed to Allah, they are completely inconsistent with the principle of the unity of Allah. However, the Javanese are still true Muslims because these practices have been Islamised. An illustration is how the reverence of the *Wali Sanga* has been sanctified. As these saints are said to stand close to Allah, asking for their intervention is actually, albeit indirectly, asking Allah's intervention. Hence, the reverence of these *Wali Sanga* becomes indirect reverence of Allah. Similarly, ancient Javanese mythologies have been Islamised too, because, as Snouck Hurgronje claims, the beginning and ending of the world in such stories are mostly Muslim (ibid.: 103-6). Furthermore, the mythological heroes of yore get an Islamic tinge. E.g. *Batara Guru* now goes to Arabia to receive teaching from the Prophet. Similarly, Muslim prophets and *Wali* meet up with creatures from the old-Javanese stories. Other stories tell how some Javanese, lured by an evil *Kyai*, obtain great wealth but after death are summoned by the devil. Likewise, the prayers for invoking the *dhanyang desa* (village guardian spirit) also include Muslim prayers besides the traditional formulas. Snouck Hurgronje even posits that the same Islamisation is also apparent in *ngelmu*, the unintelligible formulas designed to obtain power over nature (ibid.: 107). To Snouck Hurgronje, the belief in and practice of *ngelmu* falls in the sphere of magic. And magic exists as much in Java as it does in the Arab countries. Islam distinguishes magic in line with and permitted by Islam from magic that is not in line and thus not permitted. Therefore, Snouck Hurgronje argues, the fact as such that the Javanese practise *ngelmu* cannot imply that the Javanese are not Muslim. However, certain *ngelmu* should be considered as a kind of false science, a superstition, whereas true knowledge is the one that is taught at the Javanese *pesantren*. Snouck Hurgronje admits that the lack of knowledge of Arabic prevents most *murids* (a *tarekat* initiate) and *santris* from understanding the true meaning of the *kalam* (the orthodox doctrines). Neither do they see the division between popular superstitions and the true knowledge

they learn at the *pesantren*. Nevertheless, those Javanese who seriously desire a true religious education can find it in Java. The religious textbooks with Javanese translations between the Arabic lines testify to that Javanese desire to achieve true knowledge.

In summary, Snouck Hurgronje does admit that the gap between the disposition (*gezindheid*) of the Javanese and the teachings of *Qur'an* and *Hadith* is deep and wide indeed. The Javanese do not fulfil (not even most of) their religious duties (ibid. 110-13). However, the gap is not deeper or wider than in other Muslim countries. Since the scriptural ideal has not been (and cannot be) attained in any Muslim country, one should not expect the Javanese to meet higher standards than, for example, the Muslims in Mecca and Medina who were converted to Islam already many centuries before. Thus, the only reasonable conclusion is that the Javanese are as much Muslim as the Egyptians and Saudis. Javanese Islam is simply Islam that has accommodated local popular religion, by Islamising its practices and beliefs.

### 6.5. Analysis and Critique

The impact of Snouck Hurgronje's argument can be felt to this day. Today the dominant stance about religion in Java echoes his basic point: Javanese Islam is Islam pure and simple. The many Hindu, Buddhist, and animist elements we find in it do not indicate a flaw in the 'Islamness' of the Javanese. No, such elements have just been Islamised and therefore have become nothing more than a testimony to the locality of Javanese Islam. Javanese Islam is simply Islam as it is expressed in Java. An analysis of Snouck Hurgronje's argument will therefore help our understanding of the current debate.

Snouck Hurgronje is usually lauded for his pioneering combination of textual expertise with participatory observation. His impressive, even intimidating, knowledge of Islamic text and history was complemented by his practical experience in the field. It made him an absolute authority regarding Islam and more particularly Islam in Mecca, Aceh and West-Java (The Sundanese part of Java). We would therefore expect the above argument to be rooted in these two sources of his authority. However, the discussed 1884 text where Snouck Hurgronje presents it, was originally delivered in a speech in 1883 -meaning about a year before his trip

to Jeddah and Mecca and about seven years before his stay in the Netherlands Indies. None of the examples of the Javanese religious condition (*ngelmu*, *Wali Sanga*, laxity in religious duties, etc.) are drawn from his own experience, from his fabled participatory observation. Examples regarding Egyptian Muslims are drawn from the accounts of E.W. Lanes' *An account of the manners and customs of the modern Egyptians* published in 1860. Practically all of the examples regarding Javanese Muslims are drawn from the missionary reports of Poensen and Harthoorn<sup>69</sup>. Therefore, it is obvious that Snouck Hurgronje already had his mind made up about Javanese Islam before actually coming to Java. Much similar, then, to the first explorers, missionaries and early orientalists.

In his 1893-1894 *De Atjehers*, that is by the time he already had had some first-hand experiences in Mecca, Aceh and Java, Snouck Hurgronje repeats the same argument and the same examples. We might of course consider that his experiences in Java simply corroborated his earlier stance. It is however doubtful that he did indeed personally experience the exact same phenomena Harthoorn and Poensen had described in

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<sup>69</sup> Snouck Hurgronje refers to Brumund on how the graves of the *Wali* apparently used to be Heathen places of worship (Brumund 1868: 178 ff.; cf. Snouck Hurgronje 1884: 104); refers to Poensen with regard to a story that depicts people sentenced to (Islamic) hell (Poensen 1864: 237 ff.; cf. Snouck Hurgronje 1884: 106), with regard to how a Javanese appeals to the *dhanyang* ends with an Islamic prayer (Poensen 1864: 230, 232; cf. Snouck Hurgronje 1884: 106), with regard to *ngelmu paseq* and mystical Javanese whose ideas have an Islamic taint (Poensen 1873: 227 ff. and Poensen 1869: 183; cf. Snouck Hurgronje 1884: 108), with regard to how the Javanese worship both Allah and other entities as "Good Muslims" (Poensen 1864: 231-32; cf. Snouck Hurgronje 1884: 109); refers to Harthoorn and Poensen with regard to the definition of *ngelmu* (Harthoorn 1860, 130 ff.; 213 ff.; Poensen 1864: 247 ff.; cf. Snouck Hurgronje 1884: 107) and with regard to *ngelmu* and mysticism (Harthoorn 1860: 216 ff.; Poensen 1864: 218 ff.; cf. Snouck Hurgronje 1884: 107-8); refers to Hoetzoo with regard to prophetic writings (Hoetzoo 1869: 307 ff.; cf. Snouck Hurgronje 1884: 122).



their reports<sup>70</sup>. Therefore, in the following paragraphs I will focus solely on the argument Snouck Hurgronje formulated. We will weigh his argument on the basis of two questions. Firstly, is it conclusive in deciding whether the Javanese are either truly Muslim or in fact Heathens in Muslim garb? Secondly, does Snouck Hurgronje's argument help us to solve the logical inconsistency we are led into by conceiving of Javanese religion as syncretist?

#### 6.5.1. Theological or scientific argument?

The crux of Snouck Hurgronje's argument is the comparison between Egyptian and Javanese Muslims. His point seems to be that, since nobody would question the Islamic persuasion or faith of the Egyptians, even though their behaviour is so far removed from the Islamic ideal, there is no good reason to doubt the Islamic persuasion of the Javanese. This argument is predicated on two propositions that Snouck Hurgronje seems to be taking as self-evidently true.

Firstly, the behaviour of the Javanese Muslims is identical to the behaviour of the Egyptian Muslims. Besides the fact that both the Javanese and Egyptians are lax in upholding their religious duties, they also adhere to practices and beliefs that are in fact alien to Islam. Snouck lists a

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<sup>70</sup> In his time Snouck Hurgronje was indeed a pioneer: his approach of combining textual expertise with participatory observation was groundbreaking to say the least. However, his experiences in Mecca, Aceh and Java are very limited. Van Koningsveld demonstrates how most of the data (and even the most important data) regarding the daily life of Muslims in Mecca and especially of the *Jawi* community was actually gathered by Snouck Hurgronje's close associate Raden Abu Bakar Djajadiningrat (Van Koningsveld 1988: 111-19). Snouck Hurgronje's experiences during his 7 months stay in Aceh in 1891 are limited to the area of the cities of Kotaradja and Olehleh, which were within the Dutch battle lines (ibid.: 77-78, 210). This did not prevent him from extrapolating these experiences to the whole of Aceh. In Java, Snouck Hurgronje spent virtually all of his time in the Sundanese part of Java, in Buitenzorg and Batavia, with the exception of a six month journey through West and Central Java (ibid.: 144, 169). As far as I can tell he never even visited East-Java where Harthoorn and Poensen had been missionaries. Furthermore, in Java Snouck Hurgronje only fraternised with the Islamic elite. After all, his Sundanese wives were daughters of high Islamic officials. According to Zoetmulder, when in Yogyakarta Snouck Hurgronje had only mingled with people from the Muhammadiyah, that is with reformist, orthodox Muslims (Zoetmulder 1967: 13-14). We should therefore not overestimate the role of Snouck Hurgronje's first-hand experiences with regard to his argument about Javanese Islam.

number of Javanese examples such as the worship the *Wali Sanga*, the practice of *slametan*, and *ngelmu*. Even though Snouck Hurgronje does not list any Egyptian counterparts for the practices, it is obvious that he claims that this kind of behaviour is to be found in Egypt as well. What makes such practices and beliefs (both in Java and in Egypt) instances of the same phenomenon is that they are all remnants of pre-Islamic Heathenism and of the popular culture of those nations that, and this is crucial, have been Islamised. However, this is in fact a debatable point. After all, on what basis can it be said that e.g. a specific instance of reverence of ancestors or saints is an Islamic practice and not a Heathen one? The only 'yardstick' Snouck Hurgronje offers is the claim that such practices have been brought in line with Islamic teachings. Such a solution only begs the question from what point on we can say a 'Heathen' belief or practice has become in line with Islamic teachings? Are we then simply to take Snouck Hurgronje's word that *ngelmu*, *slametan* and the reverence of the *Wali Sanga* are instances of Islamised Javanese lore? Or should we rather take the word of Brumund, Poensen and Harthoorn that such practices are essentially un-Islamic? Although the matter remains unresolved, Snouck Hurgronje's position is clear. Consequently, at this point Snouck Hurgronje's argument becomes circular. After all, the proof that Egyptian and Javanese Islam are truly Islamic is the 'fact' that certain practices have been Islamised. However, this 'fact' is not self-evident and is actually the thing that needs to be proven. Therefore, in this instance Snouck Hurgronje commits the fallacy of *petitio principii*, i.e. accepting a proposition as proof, which actually needs proving.

The second proposition that Snouck Hurgronje takes for true is that the Egyptians are Muslims, even though their behaviour deviates from the Islamic (textual) norm. Based on this proposition Snouck Hurgronje makes his comparison between the Egyptian and the Javanese situation and deduces that the Javanese too must be truly Muslim. Although Snouck Hurgronje treats this proposition as self-evidently true, as a piece of common sense knowledge, it actually harbours an argument or reasoning that is Islamic theological in nature<sup>71</sup>. We can spell that argument out as follows:

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<sup>71</sup> In order to avoid confusion, I would like to stress that Snouck Hurgronje does not provide this argument, or any kind of argument to this effect. It is my claim that this proposition can be taken for true only if it is founded on such an argument.

A. One becomes a Muslim by means of a single earnest recitation of the *Shahada* in the presence of another Muslim

According to Islamic faith, after a satisfactory recitation -i.e. after meeting the criteria (usually nine) set up by Muslim scholars to ensure a recitation with conviction- one has become Muslim beyond doubt.

B. Egyptians Muslims have satisfactorily recited the *Shahada*

In the context of Snouck Hurgronje's argument the Egyptian Muslims are staged as Muslims beyond doubt. That is to say, no contemporary of Snouck Hurgronje would question whether the Egyptians are truly Muslim. Therefore, in this context it must be the case that the Egyptian Muslims have satisfactorily recited the *Shahada*.

C. Therefore, the Egyptians are Muslims

Only if we go through steps A. and B. does it make sense to claim that the Egyptians are Muslim. It is important to note that the *Shahada* is a criterion set out within Islamic religious thought. In other words, according and thus within Islamic belief, the Egyptians are Muslim.

D. Within Islamic faith, even if a Muslim does not follow the official creed, he is still Muslim

The first part of the *Shahada* is the declaration of the belief in the oneness of God (*tawhid*). *Shirk*, i.e. the deification or worship of an entity other than Allah, is the violation of this doctrine of *tawhid* and, in the absence of repentance, it is an unforgivable sin. Thus, we would expect that in order to be a 'good' or 'true' Muslim, one has to stick to this essential doctrine of *tawhid*. However, in the Islamic faith, a Muslim cannot be excommunicated (*takfir*, i.e. to be called a *kafir* or unbeliever) as long as he/she maintains that he/she is a Muslim. Therefore, in this sense, even if a Muslim commits *shirk*, he/she is still truly Muslim.

E. (Most) Egyptian Muslims do not follow their official creed

For the sake of argument, we will take Snouck Hurgronje's word on this.

F. Therefore, within Islamic faith, even though the Egyptians do not follow their official creed, they are still Muslim

It seems to me that only on such a basis can Snouck Hurgronje's second proposition be considered true. After all, his focus is on the religious disposition (*gezindheid*) of the Javanese. Is not the recitation of the *Shahada* the foremost indication of one's inclination towards Islam? The above argument, then, makes explicit that this proposition entails a lot more than just a common-sensical fact. It actually contains an Islamic theological stance which Snouck Hurgronje does not explicitly acknowledge. There are other indications that Snouck Hurgronje slips Islamic theological stances into his (scientific) account of Javanese Islam. For example, Snouck Hurgronje observes that the Javanese dub certain knowledge as heretical knowledge -this is how he translates *ngelmu paseq* -to which he ties the conclusion that we as scientists should then know how to judge it, *viz.* as heretical (Snouck Hurgronje 1884: 108). This is an obvious instance where Snouck Hurgronje equates a theological standpoint -after all, whether something is a heresy is a matter of theology- with a scientific one. Finally, Snouck Hurgronje's representation of *ngelmu* as magic (besides the representation as false knowledge) is another example of how he takes Islamic theological standpoints for scientific facts. After all, here he explicitly states that within Islam *ngelmu* is regarded as magic. However, this is not sufficient reason to accept that this is what *ngelmu* actually is. As I shall suggest in the following chapters, there is also an alternative way to make sense of *ngelmu*, i.e. in terms of practical knowledge. Therefore, I would suggest that Snouck Hurgronje's second proposition is actually Islamic theological in nature. That is to say, it is articulated within Islamic faith and thus it is predicated on the belief in Allah. The question then becomes, whether it is acceptable to use these theological stances as scientific facts? It seems to me it cannot, for two reasons. Firstly, regardless of our personal religious beliefs, we cannot predicate a scientific argument on a religious belief. The existence (or non-existence) of Allah cannot be the pre-requisite to formulate a scientific argument about the Islamic nature of Muslim believers. Such an argument would become a theological argument. Secondly, even within Islamic thought there is disagreement on the above issues, and the different standpoints are equally based on theological arguments. What

counts as acceptable for one group of Muslims might not be so for another group of Muslims. An obvious example would be the burning of incense on the graves of ancestors: while this is acceptable Islamic behaviour for one group of Javanese Muslims (e.g. the traditionalists), it is seen as un-Islamic by another (e.g. the modernists). Both argue their standpoints on theological grounds. That is, even if one is inclined to accept the above theological propositions in a scientific account, they are all but conclusive.

Summarising, Snouck Hurgronje takes a theological stance for a scientific fact. This undermines his rendition of Javanese Islam. Moreover, it makes his argument inconclusive. Who is and who is not truly Muslim is in the end a religious question and can be dealt with only within Islamic theology. In other words, it is outside the scope of a scholarly account. Consequently, the scholarly debate whether or not Javanese Islam is truly Islamic cannot be solved. This, I would suggest, at least partially explains the longevity of this particular debate within the discourse of Javanese Islam.

#### 6.5.2. The Javanese Muslims: heretic instead of syncretist?

Snouck Hurgronje's research also focused on the route and vehicle via which Islam had reached the Netherlands Indies, and Java in particular. He had come to the conclusion that Javanese Islam had originally come from the coast of South India, Coromandel and Malabar and had via (Northern) Sumatra reached Java. Over this route, Sufism and the Sufi *tarekat* was the vehicle with which Islam had travelled to Java. In South India this Islam had been Hinduised, meaning that the mystical element in it had been strengthened. According to Snouck Hurgronje, this mystically tinged Islam appealed to the Javanese who, supposedly, preferred religious speculation to upholding the daily requirements of the Islamic law. Snouck Hurgronje explains this inclination towards mysticism by the fact that at that time Java was still a Hindu state (e.g. Snouck Hurgronje 1913: 7-8; 35-43).

A *tarekat* teaches mystical exercises designed to attain unity with Allah. The resulting mystical insight, orthodox or heretical, is the kind of knowledge that falls within the category of *ngelmu*. Quite a number of these Sufi brotherhoods promoted a pantheism that has often been con-

sidered heretical. The claim that Allah is all and that all is Allah, has lead certain (Sufi) mystics to the (heretical) claim that they themselves are Allah. From his research into Indonesian and Javanese religious literature, Snouck Hurgronje concluded that Java knows of a strong and popular tradition of these heretical mystical brotherhoods that spread a heretical *ngelmu*. About their writings Snouck Hurgronje says that:

“In general one can say that the heretical-mystical writings constitute the *most original part* of the religious literature of the Netherlands Indies Mohammedans” (Snouck Hurgronje 1913: 39; italics mine)<sup>72</sup>

Claiming that heretical pantheistic mysticism is the most original element of the local Islam in the Netherlands Indies or rather in Java (after all most of his examples pertain to Java) is making the claim that this heretical tendency is typically Javanese. Now, what is so typically or originally Javanese about these texts? Not the parts and fragments dealing with Islamic law and doctrines. These, after all, can be traced back to their Arabic original. It is the many “abstruse combinations and comparisons” that, intellectually considered, are “the most ridiculous incongruities”. Snouck even calls this form of mystical thinking a “delusion” (*droombeeld*) and maintains that through such texts the teaching of the highest truth has been degraded to “an amulet for all purposes” (*ibid.*: 40). The Javanese treat the catechisms and main teachings of a *tarekat* as sanctifying formula. They either learn these formula by heart or are content with the possession of the piece of paper on which it is written (*ibid.*: 39-41).

Snouck Hurgronje’s characterisation of these heretical elements is reminiscent of the descriptions of the ‘syncretisms’ in Javanese Islam by authors such as Brumund, Poensen and Harthoorn. While to the latter this syncretism is typical for the Javanese religious condition, for the first it is heretical mysticism. In both cases, though, Javanese religious beliefs are depicted equally inconsistent and irrational. Consequently, through the door syncretism was dismissed, heresy has entered. To say that Snouck Hurgronje offers a derogatory description of Javanese Islam is an understatement. More recent research that re-evaluates the role and

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<sup>72</sup> My translation of: “In het algemeen kan men zeggen, dat de kettersch-mystieke geschriften het meest origineele gedeelte der godsdienstige letterkunde van de Indische Mohammedanen vormen.”

importance of Sufism and *tariqa* for Indonesian Islam is correcting this misrepresentation (e.g. Laffan 2011: 1-66). It has been shown that Sufism has not only been the vehicle of (heretical) mysticism, but also of orthodoxy and reformism (Azra 2004). Especially the research by Martin van Bruinessen offers valuable insight into the influence of Sufism on Islam in Indonesia and Java (e.g. 1990; 1994a; 1994b; 1999, 2007).

### 6.5.3. Logical inconsistency solved?

As I pointed out repeatedly in the course of this dissertation, speaking of a syncretist Javanese Islam leads us into logical inconsistency. This inconsistency in turn is problematic for several reasons, the main one being that it entails a characterisation of the Javanese people themselves as inconsistent, and consequently as either hypocrites (they claim to be Muslim, but in reality they are not) or as mentally inferior (they do not know what it means to be Muslim). Neither one of these consequences is acceptable, as has been argued. Such misrepresentation have been rightfully attacked by scholars such as Nancy Florida, Laura Sears<sup>73</sup>, Mark Woodward, Ann Kumar, Soebardi and so forth. These scholars alternatively tend to characterise Javanese Islam as a local expression of Islam, and consequently the Javanese Muslims as true Muslims. They stress the Sufi origins of Javanese Islam and argue that the pre-Islamic elements in Javanese Islam have been thoroughly Islamised. In short, their characterisation of Javanese Islam is virtually identical to that of the orientalist Snouck Hurgronje, apart from the latter's negative evaluation of Islam in Java as borderline or plain heretical. The question whether or not Snouck Hurgronje's argument actually solves the original inconsistency is therefore also relevant for contemporary, post-colonial scholarship.

As we saw, Snouck Hurgronje argued that the process of Islamisation was executed by Muslim scholars who developed theological arguments so as to incorporate and order certain pre-Islamic beliefs and practices into Islam in order to guarantee the greatness of Allah (Snouck Hurgronje 1884: 105). It is thus obvious that this Islamisation only happens

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<sup>73</sup> Sears argues that in the colonial analysis and representation of Javanese literary traditions, the Islamic component was downplayed and the essence of Javanese literature was located in Java's Hindu past. In this sense her research partly reproduces the post-colonial critique on syncretist Javanese Islam on the level of Java's literary traditions (Cf. Sears 1996: 75-78; 85-89).

‘after the facts’. That is to say, only when the Javanese were already practising Islamic and pre-Islamic rituals together and indiscriminately, was there a need for said Muslim scholars to execute the mentioned Islamisation. As Snouck Hurgronje pointed out, despite the fact that Islam spreads and gains stronghold in new territories, certain cultural or ‘Heathen’ practices and beliefs turn out to be ineradicable. From this the need arises to bring them in line, or assimilate them, with Islamic teachings. Therefore, the characterisation of Javanese Islam as an Islam that has assimilated or Islamised certain pre-Islamic beliefs and practices is not an alternative for syncretist Javanese Islam. After all, it is an Islamisation *ex post facto*: the Islamisation only comes after the factual ‘syncretic’ practices and beliefs have already been taking place. As a result, Snouck Hurgronje’s argument obscures rather than solves the inconsistency.

In the end, then, it seems likely that syncretist Javanese Islam and local Javanese Islam are actually two different phenomena, or perhaps two different stages in the historical evolution of Islam in Java. After all, the former predates the latter in the historical process of conversion<sup>74</sup>. Consequently, in this light, the dispute about the nature of Javanese Islam -is it syncretist or truly Islamic- becomes a non-discussion. Moreover, as pointed out above, the question whether Javanese Islam is truly Islam is actually a theological question that requires a theological answer. How then, can this scholarly debate be productive?

#### 6.6. Context and concepts. Snouck Hurgronje: crypto-theologian?

The question whether missionaries on the one hand and a scientist like Snouck Hurgronje on the other could share the same conceptual framework seems a legitimate one. After all, their characterisations of Javanese religion, either as syncretist or as heretical, strongly resemble each other.

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<sup>74</sup> Unfortunately, a discussion of the theories on syncretism in religious studies is outside the ambit of this dissertation. It is however relevant to point out that many scholars consider religious syncretism to be a phase in the way religions spread. Very briefly put, the syncretist phase marks “horizontal” conversion, while a reformative phase marks “vertical” conversion or conversion in depth. The former phase brings new converts or new cultural regions within the ambit of the religion in question. The second phase, which is historically considered to be later, either brings beliefs and practices in line with the official doctrines or sifts out those that are considered unorthodox (e.g. Leopold 2004: 88ff).



Moreover, Snouck Hurgronje has no trouble accepting the data furnished by the missionaries; both the scientist and the missionaries focus on the beliefs of the Javanese and see great inconsistencies in it; and only by describing the religious condition of the Javanese in terms of beliefs, is it possible for Snouck Hurgronje to consider certain teachings as heretical.

There is also great agreement on the course of human history and the places different cultures occupy in it. Snouck Hurgronje was an adamant defender of the ethical policy and association theory (Kuitenbrouwer 2001: 73-74). He believed that the Dutch had a responsibility towards the Javanese in terms of education and civilisation: the Javanese needed to be uplifted and it was up to the Dutch, or the West in general, to do that. The way to achieve this was through association: the civilisation and education of the coloniser was thought to somehow rub off on the indigenous population, in the first instance on the elite, if only it remained close to and under the wings of the colonial overlords (Snouck Hurgronje 1911: 83). We have already come across such an obviously paternalistic and racist attitude towards the Javanese in the preceding chapters -both the early orientalists and the missionaries were prone to it. As we saw, this stance depended on the conviction that different civilisations occupy different rungs on the evolutionary ladder and that the different stages in civilisation correspond with different religions. Within this framework the persistence of the above described superstitions and heretical beliefs is simply the result of the naivety and a lack of education of the Javanese. Snouck Hurgronje clearly endorsed this view on the evolution of mankind, when he claimed that Islam is well fitted to accustom barbarians to discipline and order, but incompatible with "modern" civilisation (Snouck Hurgronje 1884: 100). Would it at all be possible that the conceptual framework of a scientist like Snouck Hurgronje is identical to the explicitly theological one of the missionaries?

Van Koningsveld describes Snouck Hurgronje's outlook on the world as liberal-protestant (*vrijzinnig protestants*) -a conclusion he reaches after scrutinising Snouck Hurgronje's familial background and education (1988: 95-99). Snouck Hurgronje was raised in a Protestant family, and his father actually was a preacher. He was involved as a volunteer in the *Zendinghuis* where Protestant missionaries received their education before heading to the Netherlands Indies. His desire to become a preacher

made Snouck Hurgronje enrol in theology in Leiden. After a couple of years, however, his vocation seems to have changed direction, towards the study of Semitic languages. During his undergraduate years (*propaedeutise*) he was trained in Modern Theology -the theological conviction S.E. Harthoorn was partial too as well. Van Koningsveld typifies this Modern Theology as, on the one hand, based on 'naturalism' and, on the other hand, on the idea of an historical evolution of religions inspired by Darwin. The first element, naturalism, conveys the idea that religion is in fact man-made. That is to say, man has the natural capacity to religion. This capacity is an ethical consciousness (*zedelijk bewustzijn*) which expresses itself in the form of religion and results in revelations such as penned down in the Bible or the Qur'an. This naturalism implies the denial of a supernatural entity as the source of religion. Alternatively, the source of religion is thus considered a natural faculty installed in each man. Jesus, then, is not the son of God, but merely an historical figure, a master who taught neighbourly love in ancient Palestine. Consequently, historical critique is the proper method to study religions and its founders -a method which Snouck Hurgronje indeed applied to Islam. The second element, the idea that there is an evolution in the history of religions conveys the idea that this ethical consciousness is differently (more or less) evolved in different cultures. The West's supposed cultural superiority depended on the superiority of its ethical consciousness, which in turn was said to have a civilising effect on its society. Islam, of course, was deemed to be a degeneration compared to Christianity, its ethical consciousness and concomitant civilising effect much lower as well.

It is not difficult to recognise that Snouck Hurgronje's outlook on Javanese culture and religion is very much in line with Modern Theology: his view on Islam as barely suitable for bringing discipline to barbarians, his conviction that Indonesians needed to be educated by the West, the conviction that the Indonesian (and thus Javanese) level of civilisation equalled that of Antiquity or the Middle Ages (Snouck Hurgronje 1911: 61). Furthermore, he saw no bones in building upon the data provided by the missionaries, whose explicitly theological framework, as we have seen, had determined how they made sense of phenomena such as *slametan* and *ngelmu*. All these elements taken together indicate that his conceptual framework is the same as it had been for centuries: all nations have a religion, religions can be ranked in an hierarchy, (protestant) Christianity is located higher than Islam, a religious practise is the ex-

pression of a religious belief, and superstition is, if not a false belief, then at least a very unintelligent one. Thus, Snouck Hurgronje is firmly embedded in that same Western tradition of describing, categorising and discussing the religion of the Javanese. And although he is thought of as pertaining to the scientific, i.e. secular, discipline of religious studies, it turns out he shares a framework identical to his theological counterparts.

#### 6.7. A history of Islamisation: *Tarekat* and *Wali Sanga*

In his capacity as professor at Leiden University, Snouck Hurgronje put his stamp on the research of an entire generation of scholars, often by guiding them through their doctoral research. His vision on Islam in Indonesia was so compelling and the material he had gathered over the years so vast that it is no exaggeration to speak of a research programme. His ideas, arguments and research focal points recur time and again in the works of his pupils.

#### *Tarekat*

One of those focal points is the mentioned mystical side of Javanese Islam (Sufism), which has since become an important thread in the textbook story on Javanese Islam. The central claim is that it was Sufism that had first reached and spread in Java. This mystical Islam, bent on inducing an experience of unison with the Almighty, arrived in Java via the Indian shores of Coromandel and Malabar, where it already had been Hinduised. This Hinduised character, together with the Sufi practice of *dhikr* (an incantation to facilitate ecstatic experiences) is held to have facilitated the conversion of the Javanese to Islam.

This discovery of the region of origin of Javanese Islam was made on the basis of texts. Through comparison of religious texts, orientalist philologists had established that the Islamic texts prevalent in the archipelago, and in Sumatra and Java in particular, had derived from India. For example, as early as 1861 George Niemann discusses the Sufism of the Javanese on the basis of texts that explain the teachings of Al-Ghazali and Hamzah Fansuri. The former he describes as more orthodox and the second as more pantheistic and thus regarded as heretical by con-

temporaries (Niemann 1861: 348-59). Moreover, he discusses the dissemination of Islamic texts, both in Arabic and in Javanese (ibid.: 359-60). The same Niemann also shows how the Hamzanama<sup>75</sup>, although originally Persian, knows of consecutive Hindustani and Malay editions (Niemann 1870: 26). It was on the basis of such scriptural facts, that Snouck Hurgronje ventured the thesis that we should:

“... consider as land of origin of .... these novels in both languages (Malay and Acehnese) the same part of South India, where also the popular mysticism and popular religious legends of the Mohammedan people of this archipelago point to.” (Snouck Hurgronje 1894: 127)<sup>76</sup>

Despite these early mentions of Sufism, it is really Snouck Hurgronje who initiated the scientific research into the Sufi brotherhoods and Islam in Java (Van Bruinessen 1998: 195-97). His approach was based on his background in Islamic studies, his fieldwork in Mecca and Aceh, and of course his textual expertise. G.W.J. Drewes, who had Snouck Hurgronje as his doctoral supervisor, succinctly formulates Snouck Hurgronje's programme with regard to the mystical thread in Javanese Islam:

“So mysticism, orthodox as well as heretical, had spread everywhere and in its most popular form had become a receptacle where degraded remnants of authentic mystical conceptions mingled with scraps of preislamic (sic) lore and ancient magic. *This situation is clearly reflected by many of the manuscripts gathered by Snouck Hurgronje in Java and Sumatra.* Being mostly of the type of notebooks wherein pupils of religious teachers set down everything that had interested them in the course of the lessons received, they represent faithfully what kind of instruction was given and which subjects were commonly treated. Moreover, many a page of these manuscripts is filled with the customary tarīqa-matter of litanies, prayers and dhikr formulas as passed down to their pupils by teachers authorized to transmit the doc-

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<sup>75</sup> The Hamzanama is a novel relating the adventures of Amir Hamza, the uncle of the prophet Mohammed.

<sup>76</sup> My translation of: "...als het stamland van (...) romans in beide talen (Maleisch en Atjehs) hetzelfde deel van Zuid-Indië beschouwen, waarheen ook de populaire mystiek en de populaire godsdienstige legenden der Mohammedaansche volkeren van dezen Archipel wijzen.”

trines and the practices of the various fraternities which flourished in Indonesia.” (Drewes 1961: 424; italics mine)

Many scholars in the wake of Snouck Hurgronje delivered a doctoral dissertation in which they translated and discussed a Javanese religious text. In true orientalist tradition, the underlying idea is that Javanese religious texts give insight into the hearts and minds, and thus into the religious convictions of the Javanese. The translated text usually confirmed one or more of the theses set out by Snouck Hurgronje. A case in point is Van Ronkel’s doctoral thesis. Essentially it is an attempt to critically assess Snouck Hurgronje’s mentioned thesis on the origin of Muslim legends in the Archipelago (Snouck Hurgronje 1884: 98-99). Van Ronkel examines whether or not the originally Persian Hamzanama, as it is known in Aceh and Java, had reached these parts via South India or not. Van Ronkel concludes that it is via North and not via South India, thereby partially affirming Snouck Hurgronje’s thesis (Van Ronkel 1895: 3, 249-50). Other studies examine (and confirm) the idea that the Islam that had reached Java was originally the mystical Islam of the *tarekat*. For example, Rinkes’ study of the mystic Abdoerraoef of Singkel discusses his impact on Javanese and Sumatran mysticism. It deals with the Shattariya order (or *tarekat*) and its pantheism (Rinkes 1909). Rinkes was the first of a number of students who delved into Snouck Hurgronje’s collection of manuscripts for a subject for their doctoral dissertation (Drewes 1961: 423). Another fine example is Drewes’ study of the teachings of three Javanese Gurus through the analysis of their *primbon* (collection of things worth knowing). It is telling how Drewes copies Snouck Hurgronje explanation as to why the Javanese are lax in their practise of daily *salat*: the initial propagators of Islam in Java, valued the thought over action: spiritual exercises were more important than physical ones (Drewes 1925: 96 ff.). Yet another instance is Hendrik Kraemer’s translation and discussion of a 16th century *primbon*, placing it firmly in the mystical tradition that Snouck Hurgronje had lined out (Kraemer 1921). Although not one of Snouck Hurgronje’s pupils, Zoetmulder’s dissertation on pantheism and monism in Javanese *suluk* is another case in point (Zoetmulder 1935). These scholars all follow the course set out by Snouck Hurgronje: they focus on Javanese Islamic mystical texts from which they draw conclusions about the Javanese religious condition. As Van Bruinessen (1998) points out, even after 1950

research in this domain continued in this paradigm and built upon the research results of Snouck Hurgronje and his protégés.

In the centuries after the initial conversion Javanese and Sumatran hajjis joined Sufi brotherhoods in Mecca. They continued to bring Sufi Islam, both in its pantheistic (often dubbed heretic) and more orthodox variants to Java. The mystic connection between Mecca and the Indonesian archipelago is often attested to in the *silsila* (i.e. lineage of Sheiks) of the *tarekat* in question. Again the orientalist scholars discussed this connection on the basis of texts: in the Javanese religious literature of the *suluk* and *primbon* there are often references to renowned Sufist scholars such as Al-Ghazali, Al-Arabi, Al-Raniri, Abdurrauf of Sinkil, Hamzah Fansuri, *et al.* Such references are regarded as proof not only of the origin of Javanese or Indonesian Islam, but also of its mystical character, and of its truly Islamic nature. Still today a work on Islamic mysticism in Indonesia or on the origins of Islamic reformism in the form of Neo-Sufism (i.e. achievement of harmony between *tassawuf* and *sharia*) makes use of the same textual sources and points to the same networks of the *tarekat* (see respectively Steenbrink 1994; Azra 2004)

### *Wali Sanga*

The above sketched focus on *tarekat* is complemented by the study of the *Wali Sanga*, the nine saints who are said to have brought that mystical Islam to Java. These saints, or rather Sufi mystics, have been attributed with founding Islam in Java. Most of the knowledge about these *Wali Sanga* again stems from Javanese texts, such as the *Babad Tanah Jawi*. In these stories explanations are found for certain aspects of Javanese Islam. For example, one of the *Wali*, Sunan Kalijaga, is commonly attributed with inventing certain key characteristics of Javanese Islam. After all, he is said to have introduced *wayang kulit* and *gamelang* as means to spread the message of Islam. Other famous stories about the *Wali Sanga* deal with Sunan Siti Jenar, a *Wali* whose teachings are often dubbed heretic and was put to death by his fellow *Wali*. This fascinating figure pops up time and again in scholarly discussions about the nature of Javanese Islam. Moreover, the graves of the *Wali Sanga* are places of reverence and many Javanese undertake pilgrimages to them. As we saw, Snouck Hurgronje devotes a lot of attention to the veneration of these saints in

his discussion of Javanese Islam -arguing that it is an integral part of Islam to revere saints. Unsurprisingly, scholars working within his framework studied the subject accordingly. The above mentioned Rinkes discussed the *Wali Sanga* in a series of articles from 1910-1913 (Rinkes 1996). Schrieke's *Het boek van Bonang* (The book of Bonang) is a translation and discussion of a 16th century Javanese *primbon* attributed to Sunan Bonang, another prominent *Wali*. Schrieke presents it as a typical *primbon* -eclectic and mystical- and proof of Snouck Hurgronje's thesis that „The early pioneers of Islam in the Far East laid great stress on thought, while action occupied a much lower place in their scheme of life." (Schrieke 1916: 67). That is to say this early *primbon* supposedly proves the inclination in Javanese Islam towards mystical speculation to the detriment of fulfilling daily duties as set out by the law.

Working within Snouck Hurgronje's academic vision, the works of these scholars have attributed to the format through which we have come to understand Islam in Java (See e.g. Drewes 1961: 419-24). Mostly, through the translation and discussion of Javanese religious texts the idea that the origin and essence of Javanese Islam is Sufism became solidified.

#### 6.8. Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed Snouck Hurgronje's stance on the nature of Javanese Islam. He argued that, even though Javanese Islam carries many practices and beliefs from pre-Islamic religion, it actually still is a truly Islamic religion. His argument was directed against his contemporaries who held that Javanese Islam was not really Islam, but an indigenous animism with a thin layer of Islamic veneer. As we saw, more recent, post-colonial critique has targeted that same misrepresentation. Moreover, both the orientalist Snouck Hurgronje and these post-colonial scholars proffer an identical alternative to syncretist Javanese Islam: Javanese Islam is Islam that has assimilated Javanese cultural and religious elements. Assimilation refers to the process by which these elements have been brought in line with the teaching of Islam. It is thus to be set aside from syncretism which points out an incongruity, i.e. such elements are considered not in line with Islamic teachings. An analysis of Snouck Hurgronje's argument helped us to assess the post-colonial argument.

Firstly, we have observed that Snouck Hurgronje's description of Javanese Islam stayed within the same Christian theological confines as those of his predecessors. In fact, the evidence we scrutinised (such as his formation in Modern Theology), suggests that Snouck Hurgronje's depiction of Javanese religion is an instance of secularised theology. That is to say, even though Snouck Hurgronje does not condone Protestant theology, it is still the implicit conceptual background against which his own understanding of Javanese Islam makes sense. In other words, the secular, humanist (*vrijzinnig*) Snouck Hurgronje resorts to the same conceptual reservoir as his explicitly Christian predecessors in order to represent Javanese Islam. Consequently, even though Snouck Hurgronje is a monument in the scientific study of Islam, his description of Javanese Islam is constrained by the same set of assumptions and concepts as the descriptions preceding his.

Secondly, I have argued that his argument about the nature of Javanese Islam does not solve the inconsistency described in chapter one. His depiction of Javanese Islam as essentially Islamic (instead of the 'syncretist stance' that holds that it is not) of course no longer holds this inconsistency. After all, it argues that pre-Islamic cultural and religious elements have been brought in line with Islamic teachings. However, the assimilation only happens after Javanese Muslims had already been involved in practices and beliefs that were *not* in line with Islamic teachings. In other words, syncretist Javanese Islam and native or local Islam are simply two different phenomena. This observation helps us to understand why the discussion about the nature of Javanese Islam has been such a confusing one: the different sides are in fact talking about different phenomena as if they were talking about one and the same.

Thirdly, I have argued that Snouck Hurgronje smuggled a piece of Islamic theology into his account of Islam in Java. That is, the basis on which he argues who is (and who is not) a true Muslim, is the same that is used within Islamic theology. However, within Islam there is disagreement on who is and is not truly Muslim. As a consequence, this ambivalence is carried into Snouck Hurgronje's stance as well. More importantly, the question who is and who is not truly Muslim is in the end a theological question that can only be answered with a theological answer. Therefore, this issue simply cannot be settled within a scholarly account



and thus the scientific discussion on the true nature of Javanese Islam is in fact a pseudo discussion.

If today scholars argue, usually in reaction to Geertz' *The religion of Java*, that Javanese Islam is but a local expression of Islam, with its roots in Sufism and the *tariqa*, they in fact repeat the arguments developed by one of the most important orientalist in the history of colonial Java. As such, they run the risk of committing the same fallacies as did Snouck Hurgronje: *petitio principii*, dressing up theological stances as scholarly arguments, and ignoring the historical process of conversion. The theoretical problems surrounding syncretist 'Javanese Islam', therefore are as acute as in the beginning of this dissertation. In the next two chapters I aim to sketch an alternative approach to the issues surrounding syncretist 'Javanese Islam'. I will do so in two steps. Firstly, I will elaborate on the constraints within which this 'Javanese Islam' was conceived. One of the arguments I will make is that these constraints are Western cultural in nature and that these constraints have compelled observers from the West to see religions where actually there are none. Consequently, I will argue that syncretist Javanese Islam is an experiential entity. This implies that Javanese Islam does not exist in reality, but only in the experiential world of the West. Secondly, I will make use of a hypothesis on cultural differences in order to show how this suggestion of the non-existence of Javanese Islam is epistemologically interesting. In other words, if Javanese Islam does not exist, then what have we been describing for all this time? In answering this question, I hope to show that there are alternative approaches that open new fields of research.



## 7. A new avenue? *Agama* and *slametan*

In the previous chapters we have discussed the theoretical problems surrounding the concept of syncretist Javanese Islam. As I argued, this concept cannot but be a misrepresentation, as it leads to a logical inconsistency, and consequently to a racist depiction of the Javanese. The two avenues open to us for resolving this inconsistency turned out to be unproductive. Firstly, denying this religion's Islamic essence (e.g. by referring to it as Javanism or *abangan* religion) resulted in the same theoretical problems. Secondly, I have dismissed native or local Islam as an alternative concept. I did so on the basis of the observation that the concepts 'syncretist Javanese Islam' and 'local/native Islam' actually refer to two different phenomena. Thus, the presence of Islam in Java and its assimilation of Javanese, pre-Islamic cultural and religious elements, in itself, cannot and does not debunk syncretist Javanese Islam. Consequently, we have not yet been able to establish what 'syncretist Javanese Islam' refers to in Javanese cultural reality. In other words, since 'syncretist Javanese Islam' is a misrepresentation, of *what* is it a misrepresentation? For the remainder of this dissertation I will try to give at least a partial answer to this question.

### 7.1. Javanese religion as an experiential entity

I would like to present a train of thought developed by S.N. Balagangadhara that helps us get to terms with the suggestion that (syncretist) 'Javanese Islam' or 'Javanism' does not exist. Furthermore, it offers an alternative to the post-colonial power-knowledge argument. Balagangadhara takes his cue from Said's characterisations of Orientalism as a set of constraints:

“ ‘Orientalism is better grasped as a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought than it is simply as a positive doctrine’ (Said 1978: 42). This means a ‘limited vocabulary and imagery ... impose themselves as a consequence’ (Said 1978: 60). That is to say, the limited vocabulary and imagery of the Orientalist discourse are the consequences of a set of constraints imposed upon western think-

ing in its attempts to understand a world manifestly different from its own.” (Balagangadhara and Keppens 2009: 54)

What set of constraints could have been working upon Western thinking in its attempts to understand Javanese cultural reality? When Tomé Pires is puzzled by the behaviour of the king of Tuban, which constraints led him to conclude that the king was a superficial Muslim? Similarly, what constraints led a Christophorus Schweitzer to estimate that the Javanese were Muslim and Heathen at the same time? The conceptual framework and the structuring concepts discussed in each step of our genealogy indicate in which way Western thinking has been constrained. Only on the basis of the assumption of the universality of religion and the concomitant conceptualisation of certain practices as expressions of religious beliefs could Javanese religion be thus conceived. These constraints are apparent in the way certain phenomena were questioned: they were questioned in terms of religion and the solution was offered in terms of religion as well. As I have repeatedly pointed out, these assumptions are in origin Biblical or theological verities. And, even though the Bible may have lost its status of being a true and exact description of the world and its history, these same assumptions have maintained their constraining effect<sup>77</sup>. Thus, I would suggest, the West’s thinking about and its attempts to understand Javanese cultural reality are constrained by Western theology.

Since the first Western visitors to Java were confronted with a culture thoroughly alien to their own, it stands to reason then that energy and time was invested in making sense of it. Their accounts of Java are both a reflection on their experiences and an opportunity to structure them. In fact, when we look at the succession of descriptions through the centuries, it is striking how these become more and more structured. As pointed out before in this dissertation, a loop came into being between these accounts and the actual experience they describe. The former offered the structures for the latter, while the latter came to confirm the

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<sup>77</sup> The process by which theological concepts have become common-sense verities in social sciences is described in Balagangadhara 1994. A thorough discussion of this process, i.e. double dynamic of religion, is out of the scope of this dissertation. For the purpose of this dissertation it suffices to point out that throughout the genealogy of ‘Javanese Islam’ we have seen a continuity in the constraints within which this concept came about. Since the constraints are theological in origin, we can dub them secularised theology.

former. Consequently, the constraints within which these Western accounts of Java were written, also constrained the Western experience of Java. Javanese religion (be it Javanism or Javanese Islam), then, came to be a part of the way the West described and experienced Java. In the words of Said:

“ I shall be calling *Orientalism* [emphasis in the original] a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the *Orient's special place in European Western experience.*’ (Said 1978: 1; emphasis added)” (Ibid.: 52)

The Orient has a place in Western experience, or in Balagangadhara’s terms, the Orient is an ‘experiential entity’ to Westerners. In other words, the Orient exists as an entity in the experiential world of the West. Javanese religion is a case in point. As we saw, Western observers in Java were confronted with phenomena they had trouble rendering intelligible. What they saw puzzled them: how can someone claim to be Muslim but behave in a way that is arguably un-Islamic<sup>78</sup>? By framing their observations in terms of religion, and consequently in terms of superficial or inauthentic Islam, they lent intelligibility to their experiences. The rendition of their observations in e.g. travel accounts helped to structure not only their own experiences, but also the experience of successive generations of observers. This is evidenced by how each new generation built on the descriptions of the former. These successive generations also reported on their experiences, thus giving substance and detail to the inherited structure, and further consolidating the Western experience of certain aspects of Javanese reality. This is how the loop between experience and description (of these experiences) came into being. In the process, phenomena that could not be structured accordingly were filtered out (Ibid.: 57-58). This is what Said means when speaking about the structuring and restructuring inherent in Orientalism. By selecting only those fragments of the Orient -or in this case Java’s reality- that appear salient to Western observers, the first observers created a structure that seemed sensible to them. This structure was then continuously rehashed and thus fortified in consecutive descriptions (Said 2003 [1978]: 113-97). I have illustrated this structure by referring to familiar, i.e. sali-

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<sup>78</sup> For argument’s sake, I am leaving open the question whether these observers had sufficient knowledge of Islam to make such judgements. The point is that something struck them and this was consistently framed in certain terms.

ent themes such as superficial faith, adherence to beliefs and practices from different religions, smooth conversion, and religious tolerance.

The genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' exemplifies the said loop. After the initial fragments have been selected -i.e. conceptualised as religious beliefs and practices- each phase represents a reenforcement of the initial structure and thus of the experiential entity that is Javanese Islam. However, the structure of the experiential entity does not self-evidently relate to a structure in Javanese cultural reality. That is to say, the Western descriptions of syncretist 'Javanese Islam' are descriptions of an experiential entity and not of an entity in Javanese reality. As I argued in the previous chapters, the genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' shows that empirical and theoretical proof for the existence of such a Javanese religion are lacking. In fact what we observed was how certain fragments of Javanese culture, those that appear salient to the West, were selected and became constituent elements of 'Javanese Islam'. This, I have argued, is how the *Gestalt* 'Javanism' or 'Javanese Islam' came into being. A case in point are *ngelmu* and *slametan*. 'Javanese Islam' being an experiential entity then implies that we do not know how such fragments are actually interconnected in reality, or even of what cultural phenomena they actually are fragments. In these last two chapters I hope to add more substance to this claim.

As we saw, *slametan* and *ngelmu* have been isolated and described as respectively a ritual expressing a Javanese worldview and as the religious beliefs of the Javanese. Through such descriptions syncretist Javanese religion, both 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism', became conceived of as a variant, albeit a pale variant, of the Semitic religions, such as Christianity and Islam. By describing Javanese religion as having its own core religious beliefs and doctrines (or worldview) and having its own central religious ritual, it becomes symmetrical to Semitic religions. This observation more or less corresponds with Werner Cohn's that anthropological accounts describe non-Western religions, such as the *abangan* religion, along the characteristics essential to Western religion. The former's essential characteristics however, are not the same as the latter's. The identification of Javanese religion as an experiential entity adds an extra dimension to this observation. If Javanese religion is an experiential entity in the experiential world of the West and if it does not exist in Javanese reality, then what are *slametan* and *ngelmu*? After all, in the absence of a

Javanese religion they cannot be its central ritual or its religious doctrines. In the remaining pages I will expound on the proposal that Javanese religion is a experiential entity. I will do so by reconsidering the data provided by ethnographic and anthropological accounts from Javanese Studies. For this I will make use of a heuristic.

## 7.2. On cultural differences, a heuristic, and alternative descriptions

In the remainder of this dissertation I will attempt to generate partial alternative descriptions of three phenomena in Javanese culture: *agama*, *slametan* and *ngelmu*. *Agama* is commonly understood as religion, *slametan* as the central ritual of Javanese religious life, and *ngelmu* as the doctrines or beliefs of Javanese religion. As far as possible, I will contrast these common, prevalent descriptions with the alternative ones. For this I will draw on a hypothesis from the scholarly field of *Vergelijkende Cultuurwetenschap* (*Comparative Science of Cultures*), which allows us to partially describe cultural differences along the lines of cultural specific ways of learning. The hypothesis has it that cultures are configurations of learning (Balagangadhara 1994: 441-500; 2012: 13-33, 60-94). In the following paragraphs I will briefly paraphrase this hypothesis and discuss its relevance to the discussion at hand.

### 7.2.1. Cultures as configurations of learning

Learning is the way by which we make a habitat. Humans are, more so than other animals, dependent upon their capacity for learning in order to make a habitat for themselves. They make a habitat not only in the natural world, but also in human groups. Thus, a human being needs to learn to live in the social environment and needs to learn to live in the bigger natural environment. One usually learns to live in the latter through living in the first. All human beings are socialised: they learn who the others in the group are, and what it means to live with them. This socialisation, i.e. this learning to live in a human group, depends on a reservoir of resources such as the traditions, customs and institutions of the group. The existence of such a reservoir implies the existence of certain constraints on what is transmitted and how this is transmitted.

On the one hand, the subject that is being transmitted has a constraining effect on the manner of transmission. For example, learning Newton's law of inertia is different from how one learns to tie one's shoelaces. On the other hand, the mechanisms of transmission have developed over time -through trial and error, conscious deliberation, unintended discoveries. In this sense, differences between cultures can be characterised along the lines of the constraints on the ways of transmission.

These constraints on the what and the how of transmission can also be seen as constraints on the production of knowledge -which is after all the end result of a learning process. Hence, differences between cultures can be understood as the differences between the ways their knowledge production is structured or patterned.

A learning process has two sides, teaching and learning, and the success of a learning process depends on the teaching dovetailing with the learning. Moreover, a process of learning (i.e. a learning process consisting both of teaching and learning) also involves meta-learning: learning how to learn. That is, not only does the 'teacher' draw on the resources of the human group, but the 'learner' does so as well: he/she learns to learn in a particular way. This meta-learning, then, can be seen as the way to structure or to form learning, i.e. as the way to bring forth knowledge (Balangadhara 1994: 446). Therefore, the differences between learning processes are also present on the level of this meta-learning.

Balangadhara suggests that within each human group there are different learning processes (and consequently different kinds of knowledges): e.g. a learning process to build societies and groups, one to create poetry and music, one to make theories and speculation, and so on (2012: 29-30). Many other kinds of learning could be discerned. The difference between cultures can then be mapped according to the way these learning processes have been structured:

“What is specific to cultures, that is, what makes some group into a culture, can be picked out along the following lines: something is used to structure different goings-about in the world. This entity gives birth to a process of learning to learn. Because this process is a configuration of different kinds of learning-activities, each one of them generates its own meta-learning. It is 'a process' because, in this configuration, one kind of learning activity is *dominant*. It



subordinates other kinds of learning activities to itself. I should like to call such configurations of learning processes as culture-specific ways of learning.” (Balagangadhara 1994: 446; italics in original)

These different kinds of learning processes are thus coordinated that one learning process has become dominant, and the others subordinated. This means that one kind of meta-learning dominates the other learning-processes and their meta-learning. Three caveats. Firstly, this hypothesis does not suggest that there is only one learning process present in a culture, or that the subordinated learning processes do not get transmitted. Secondly, a configuration of learning should be seen in developmental terms. That is to say, such a configuration comes into being over a long period of time, through the coordination of the different learning processes. It is stable to the extent a culture is and it is complete only to the extent a culture can be. Thirdly, by characterising a culture in terms of that which brings about a culture-specific way of learning, it can also be characterised in terms of its culture-specific knowledge (Ibid.: 447). Consequently, even though all kinds of knowledges are present in each culture, these knowledges are produced in a culture-specific way, i.e. by a specific configuration of learning.

### 7.2.2. Two implications so far

The extent to which an individual is capable of acquiring the meta-learning, is paralleled by his/her ability to draw upon the resources of socialisation that in turn determines to what extent he/she can build, sustain and alter the structure of his/her experience (Balagangadhara 2012: 30-33). That is to say, there is not only an individual side to one’s personal experience, but also a social side, a side that is shared with its group, and that has been brought forth by the configuration of learning. In this sense we should understand how it is possible for Western observers to have a shared experience of a Javanese religion.

Given that there are cultural differences between the West and Java, we can now start thinking of these differences in terms of their respective dominant learning processes. If we follow the reasoning as laid out

above, we should expect that in Java a different learning process is dominant than in the West.

### 7.2.3. Two different configurations of learning

Balagangadhara suggests that in the West “a root model of order” has brought about the culture-specific learning process (Balagangadhara 1994: 448-60). By structuring the experience of the world, this “root model of order” brings about a specific configuration of learning that has made theoretical knowledge dominant<sup>79</sup>. This kind of knowledge can be typified as ‘knowing about’. For the purpose of our discussion, I will merely present a characterisation in broad strokes. Firstly, the attitude that comes with a configuration of learning where theoretical knowledge is dominant, is one that primarily seeks knowledge about and sees the world as a place to discover and decipher, to seek and discover its regularities. Hence, knowledge about the world is knowledge of what is in the world. Secondly, such knowledge is considered to be verbal: it is to be communicated through and accumulated in words. These, in turn, can be interpreted, argued, etc. A typical example would be that psychological problems should first be voiced, these utterances are then interpreted and analysed, only then can they be solved or treated, usually by more talking. Thirdly, it implies that *knowing*-about is a prerequisite for *going*-about in the world. Activities in the world are to be guided by knowledge about the world. For example, in order to be a friend one must know what a good friend is; in order to build a society one must know what a good society is; in order to be fair, one must know what fairness is, etc.

Balagangadhara also sketches an Asian configuration of learning. His characterisation starts from the question of how to live. Given that human groups face the same or similar predicaments in going-about in the

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<sup>79</sup> It will lead us too far to discuss where this “root model of order” stems from. Here I can only point out that it has come about as a result of the Christianisation of the West. Since Christianity is, to its believers, a message about the entire cosmos, it inculcates a certain attitude within them, viz. the expectation that the world is ordered and that it expresses the will of God. Man’s task is to discover that order or God’s will. The inculcated attitude is one of knowing about, of intelligibility through knowing the explanation of something. For a thorough discussion, see Balagangadhara (1994).

wider world, this question confronts both West and East. In his hypothesis, the question can be treated in (minimally) two different ways and the different configurations of learning can be seen as different answers to that same question of biological survival. The first answer, the ‘Western’ answer, is finding out *what* there is in the place where we live, and take it from there. The second answer, the ‘Asian’ answer, is to treat this question “as a problem to go-about in the world” and consequently the answer becomes performative in nature (ibid.: 460). In this case, the configuration of learning is dominated by a practical or performative learning process. This practical learning process has subordinated the other learning processes:

“the ‘object’ of thinking about must be the activities of going-about; the purpose of thinking about is to improve these activities; but because the activities are the dominant ones in the configuration, thinking about these actions does not provide the foundation to going-about the world, but as its critic.” (ibid.: 462)

That which structures the configuration of learning must itself be a structured set of goings-about in the world. This structured set of goings-about in the world is itself performative in nature and also generates a meta-learning (learning how to learn)<sup>80</sup>. Consequently, this structured set of goings-about answers the question of how to live, not by building a view of the world, but by developing an *ability* to try and live the best way possible. It does so not by imparting knowledge *about*, but by imparting practical knowledge, knowledge of *how-to*.

In summary, I take from Balagangadhara’s hypothesis only the following suggestion: the difference between Western culture and Asian, *in casu* Javanese, culture can be described in terms of the dominant type of knowledge (i.e. the end result of a learning process). As a result, we wind up with the following contrast-set: theoretical knowledge versus practical, performative knowledge. The first deals with knowing-about, the second with knowing-how-to. The end result of the first is abstract

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<sup>80</sup> Here too, I need to restrict the discussion of what brings about a ‘performative’ configuration of learning to a bare minimum. Balagangadhara suggests that a “structured set of goings-about” has brought about this configuration of learning. Such an entity would be described as “a-intentional, agent-less, and goal-less”, and ritual in Asia seems to meet these requirements (Balagangadhara 1994: 465).

knowledge, the end result of the second is a skill. In the remainder of my dissertation I will attempt to generate a partial characterisation of *agama*, *ngelmu* and *slametan* by using this idea of practical or performative knowledge as a heuristic. This implies that I am not pretending to offer an alternative explanation of these Javanese phenomena. Firstly, the hypothesis is pitched a level that is too abstract to do this. After all, the proposal to consider 'Asian culture' as a configuration of learning is so broad that we cannot spell out the conditions under which it would be true or false. Therefore, I would like to stress the speculative and tentative character of the hypothesis. It is designed to get a handle on a specific problem, *in casu* that of describing cultural differences, and not as a description of 'Asian' reality. The proposal thus entails the suggestion to describe the differences between 'Western' and 'Eastern' cultures (or any culture for that matter) in terms of knowledge. The proposal further suggests to consider practical knowledge to be dominant in 'Eastern' cultures and theoretical knowledge to be dominant in the West. Secondly, the relative absence of alternative *descriptions* (as contrasted to those who mirror Western religious practices), makes it impossible to even start such an enterprise of *explaining*. Therefore, the characterisations I will be generating are merely a modest attempt to start filling that void. As such, it is but one of the preliminary steps to a truly alternative explanation.

#### 7.2.4. Configurations of learning: a new Orientalism?

Some readers might think of my usage of Balagangadhara's hypothesis on cultures as configurations of learning as just another Orientalism. There are, as far as I can see, three possible ways in which they could make their case.

Firstly, one could say that I, as a Westerner, have taken it upon myself to describe a non-Western culture, *in casu* a Javanese one. In this case one could assume that by being a Westerner I am the captive of a Western framework, one which I will never be able to overcome: I am doomed to apply Western categories to a non-Western culture, and hence misrepresentation of Javanese culture is inevitable. If we take this critique in the most charitable way -i.e. I will not go into the fact that I am making use of a hypothesis developed by an Indian scientist, and therefore that in order to claim this is an Orientalist hypothesis along the above lines one would need to further explain how his hypothesis reflects a Western

framework- it is a question about the scientificity of the hypothesis. Such a question deals amongst others with its explanatory and heuristic force, its testability or falsifiability, and the extent to which it rests upon (unwarranted) assumptions. The last point is the one relevant to the issue at hand, as we are discussing suspicions of Orientalism. Keeping in mind that Balagangadhara's hypothesis has been brought in with the aim of describing cultural differences, we should compare the assumptions it makes and the assumptions the well-known Orientalist hypothesis makes. (For argument's sake I am equating what I have identified as a theological framework in the course of this dissertation with the 'Orientalist hypothesis'.) The latter is based on the assumption of the universality of religion and the concomitant idea that differences between cultures can be mapped according to their religions. As I have argued throughout this dissertation this assumption is, if not flat-out false, at least highly contested and both in origin and in essence a Western, Christian theological, assumption. The former merely assumes that humans are very apt at learning (hardly an assumption) and that humans dispose over several learning processes instead of one. (Its suggestion of configurations of learning processes and the role a root model of order would play in these configurations are the actual hypothesis and should not be taken as an assumption upon which a hypothesis is based.) If we compare these two assumptions then I think it is safe to state that the second not only fares a lot better, it is hardly to be considered an Orientalist assumption.

Secondly, one could argue that I am juxtaposing East to West, as did the orientalists of yore, thereby committing the orientalist sin of dichotomy or that of binary opposition. However, one might ask, what is so intrinsically reproachable about binary oppositions or dichotomies? Is a trichotomy by definition better than a dichotomy? And would a quadchotomy be even better? etc. Are we, ever since Said's critique on Orientalist knowledge, no longer allowed to compare two objects (cultures in this case) lest we want to be chastised as orientalists? Obviously, such a stance would be indefensible. Therefore, I propose that the problem is not so much that I am employing Balagangadhara's hypothesis to juxtapose an Eastern to a Western culture, i.e. to make a dichotomy, but rather that I discuss such entities in terms of an Eastern and a Western culture. Do these entities actually exist? Where to draw the boundaries? What is East? What is West? Are East and West as concepts not very

vague -or fluid, porous, amorphous? And is the way of characterising these two cultures not somehow an unwarranted reduction or generalisation?

In other words, and this is the third possibility, one might argue that I am being essentialist. After all, am I not characterising Western culture as essentially Christian or essentially theoretical and Eastern culture as essentially ritualistic or essentially practical? Although it might be tempting to interpret the way I employ Balagangadhara's hypothesis in this way, there are at least three considerations that would refute such an evaluation. Firstly, the suggestion of a configuration of learning allows to think of cultures as harbouring many different kinds of knowledge, of which theoretical and practical are but two kinds. The suggestion that one of these knowledges has become dominant does not imply a reduction of all other knowledges to that one kind. Therefore, the proposal that Western culture can be characterised by its penchant for theoretical knowledge, and Asian culture by its tendency to practical knowledge is not an identification of these cultures' essences. Actually, the idea of a configuration of learning leaves open the possibility to envisage many differences and nuances and in no way then does this hypothesis reduce Western or Asian culture to a monolithic entity -another typical post-colonial reproach. Secondly, it would not be correct to think of these configurations as fixed. That is, this hypothesis does not make claims about some unchanging essence in the cultures of the West and East. The suggestion that in the West theoretical knowledge has become dominant also implies the possibility of it becoming subordinated. In other words, in this hypothesis culture is taken to be changing over time. The hypothesis thus allows to describe a given culture both at a certain point in time as over a longer period of time. Thirdly, in this hypothesis it is suggested that in the West there is something that has enabled theoretical knowledge to become dominant over time. This entity is identified as religion, in particular Christianity. A similar suggestion is made with regard to Asian culture: the ubiquitous presence of ritual has enabled practical knowledge to become dominant. These suggestions are obviously something completely different than an identification of Christianity as the essence of the West and ritual as the essence of the East. At no point does Balagangadhara's hypothesis on cultures make such statements. Being a hypothesis, it does nothing more than propose a conjecture that may allow us (at some point) to come to a better understanding

of the subject at hand, *in casu* cultural differences. In my dissertation I have used this hypothesis as a heuristic, i.e. I have used it to generate 'new' partial descriptions of certain phenomena in Javanese cultural reality. My aim has thus been much more modest than a characterisation of the essence of Javanese culture, let alone Asian culture.

If it is indeed the case that in my adoption of Balagangadhara's hypothesis I have made no statements about the essences of West and East (neither explicit nor implicit), if I am not guilty of the crime of dichotomisation, and if I have made no assumptions that are demonstrably Western in origin, then I believe it would be incorrect to regard my account as yet another Orientalism.

### 7.3. An asymmetry: *agama* as tradition vs. *agama* as religion

Today in Java (and in the whole of Indonesia) *agama* means religion. What constitutes a religion in Indonesia is a quite clear-cut affair, since the ratification as a religion is regulated by the Ministry of religion. In order to be recognised as such, "... a religion must be revealed by God, possess a prophet and a holy book, have a codified system of law for its followers, and further, it should enjoy international recognition and not be limited to one single ethnic group" (Picard 2011: 13). Today, then, there are only 6 official religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism<sup>81</sup>. The invasive, if not pernicious, effects of this policy on some of Indonesia's religious and spiritual traditions can be illustrated by, on the one hand, Hinduism and, on the other, the *aliran kebatinan* or *aliran kepercayaan*. The first, which in academic literature is considered to be all but a monotheistic religion, has had to reinvent itself as such in order to be acknowledged. Robert Hefner for example relates how the Tenggerese Hindu community in East-Java has come increasingly under the influence of Hindu reform movements that apply (or impose?) this government approved version of Hinduism (Hefner 1985: 247-65). The second, being the category name for a plethora of Javanese spiritual traditions, actually contains a number of 'sects' or spiritual groups that strictly speaking would match the definition of a modern day *agama*. However, the *aliran kepercayaan* have come

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<sup>81</sup> Recently, Bahá'í faith seems to have been added to the list.

to resort under the authority of the Ministry of Education and Culture and are thus effectively not recognised as religions (Patty 1986: 72-73; Picard 2011: 13). This conceptualisation of *agama*, according to Picard, builds on a Christian definition of religion and then on an Islamic evaluation of it (2011: 3). The concept of *agama* has been pitted against that of *adat* or tradition. *Adat* is an Arabic loanword and in the whole Islamic world signifies those customs that do not have an explicit Islamic legitimation (Van Bruinessen 1999: 167 in Picard 2011: 6). Such practices are usually the customs or lore that belong to specific social or ethnic groups. However, by dubbing such customs as *adat* they have become neutralised. That is to say, they are no longer considered as challenges to Islam and their status has somehow been reduced to folklore, superstition, or ‘old-fashioned ways’.

### *Agama as adat*

Picard argues that the concept of *agama* used to be conflated with the concept of *adat* (ibid.: 6). This means that *agama* was actually considered an *adat*, i.e. a tradition. In general terms, traditions are usually considered to be fixed sets of practices handed down from generation to generation. What then could it imply for an *agama* to be a tradition? Drawing on Jan Gonda’s 1973 *Sanskrit in Indonesia*, Picard lists the different meanings of *agama* in Sanskrit and Old Javanese. Here we find that *agama* means, amongst others: “anything handed down as fixed by tradition”; “a body of customary law”; “religious and moral traditions”; “the religious knowledge of a brahman (...) and also of a high Buddhist functionary”; moreover, “the words *sang hyang* ‘the divine, holy’ often preceding it emphasize its superhuman character” (ibid.: 3-4). This approximation of *agama* in the Javanese sense -in contrast to the current official, Indonesian sense- gives us a point of departure for an alternative to the Western, orientalist description of Javanese religion. At this point I need to draw attention to an important caveat: in the following reflection I am not presupposing that *agama* as *adat* and *agama* as religion delineate the same set of phenomena. Neither am I presenting *agama* as *adat* as an overarching term for the Javanese practices that have been discussed so far and will be discussed below (such as *slametan* and *ngelmu*). I am making no such assumptions. Instead what I will be doing is merely reflect upon



the possible ramifications of the conceptualisation of *agama* as *adat*. In other words, if *agama* is indeed a tradition -i.e. a fixed set of practices handed down from generation to generation- then it might be possible to deduce a number of its characteristics. I will then consult a very limited number of sources to see if such an approach might be fruitful. The sources are limited in number, and also restricted in time and place. Therefore, they cannot be taken as representing the Javanese view on *agama*, *ngelmu*, and *slametan* through the ages and in all layers of Javanese society. The investigation presented here should thus be regarded as preliminary in character.

Firstly, a tradition is upheld for tradition's sake. This implies that there is no need for an exterior reason for upholding it. After all, one practices one's tradition, because that is the way of one's ancestors, and has been handed down as such. However, *agama* as religion revolves around belief. For example one becomes a Christian because one believes that God exists and the Bible contains his message. Christians uphold their rituals out of belief: e.g. Catholics join in the Eucharist because it is believed to be the sacrament through which God's grace is bestowed upon the partakers. However, the Javanese original conception of *agama* is one in terms of a tradition. Therefore, in Javanese descriptions of *agama* as tradition we would expect them to motivate their adherence to it on the basis of it being a tradition, and not on the basis of belief.

Some readers might feel compelled to challenge this contrast set. One may want to argue that one does not become Christian out of belief, but because one follows the ways of one's parents. There is of course some truth to this rebuttal. If one has Christian parents than obviously it is much more likely to become a Christian than e.g. a Muslim or a Buddhist. In that sense one indeed follows the ways of one's parents. However, this ignores the process by which one becomes a (full) member of a Christian community. This can be illustrated by baptism, the sacrament by which one is admitted and adopted into the Church. Although in many strands of Christianity baptism only takes place when the person to be baptised is of a certain age which allows him/her to understand and comply with the baptism, in Catholicism one is usually baptised as an infant. In the first instance one is indisputably familiar with the underlying belief of the ritual, which in the end is the reason for being baptised. In the second case the baptised person really doesn't have a choice

and one could argue that here, instead of being motivated by belief, one is forced to follow in one's parents footsteps. However, in Catholicism baptism -which is a sacrament that is necessary to have access to the kingdom of heaven- is only complete when one has also fulfilled the sacrament of confirmation, which is the true confession to Christ. This ritual usually takes place at the age of twelve and is preceded by a period of intense catechism in which the soon to be catechised learn amongst others the meaning and purpose of the ritual. Therefore, even if those taking part in the ritual of baptism or confirmation do so out of pressure (because their parents did so), their understanding of and motivation for the ritual is not predicated on the idea that it is (merely) a tradition. Similarly, if one would ask these Christians why they partake in the Eucharist, the reason would hardly be because one upholds the traditions of one's ancestors. Such an answer would actually make one's adherence the Church suspect. Contrary, in the case of Java we have seen that such an answer is perfectly acceptable. It is on the basis of these considerations that I argue for the proposed contrast set.

Secondly, if *agama* is a tradition, it is logical to expect that its distinguishing trait is practice, or the way it is practised. Distinctions between *agama* as religion are made first and foremost on the basis of their respective beliefs. Should we, for example, want to set Islam apart from Christianity then the most direct way surely would be to point out the difference in beliefs between these two: e.g. while Christians believe Jesus was the son of God, the Messiah and thus the fulfilment of the old covenant, to Muslims he is but one prophet in a long line of prophets of which Mohammed is actually the last and final one. However, in *agama* as tradition we would expect a focus on the practice of it. We would therefore expect that distinctions between different *agama* are expressed in terms of practice rather than in terms of belief.

Thirdly, If *agama* is indeed a fixed set of *practices*, then we should see a difference between the way *agama* as tradition and *agama* as religion approach the matter of truth. It is common knowledge that Semitic religions (certified cases of *agama* in the contemporary Indonesian sense) make claims about being the truth. Consider how both Christians and Muslims believe that the revelation as recorded in the Bible and *Qur'an* respectively is the truth. Moreover, their truths are exclusivist. For example, either Jesus is the Messiah, or he is merely a prophet in a line of

prophets. Accepting either of these two doctrines as true, excludes the other one as false. In this sense, different *agama* as religion are competitors for the truth. However, *agama* as a praxis cannot be true or false. Ascribing such predicates to a practice would actually be a category mistake. It would make no sense to claim that this or that execution of a ritual is the *truth*. While it would make sense to claim that this or that way of performing a ritual is the *right* way. Although, *agama* as tradition might be considered a *way* to reach the truth (say, the true nature or the essence of life) this is still different from it being the truth. Different *agama* as tradition, then, are different *ways* to reach that truth. Thus, it would be logical to expect a focus on correct praxis rather than correct belief: orthopraxy instead of orthodoxy. Consequently, we would expect expressions of this sentiment in Javanese descriptions of their spiritual traditions.

Fourthly, as traditions are fixed sets of practices handed down from generation to generation, they become tied to a particular social group. In other words, this specific way of doing things becomes the way a specific group does things. This is obviously the case with e.g. certain traditional dances or festivities which today would fall under the category of folklore. In a similar vein, we would expect the Javanese to describe *agama* as tradition as tied to a specific social group. Contrary to this is how *agama* as religion explicitly aims at transcending social and national boundaries. After all, religions such as Christianity and Islam claim to be the truth, that is a universal truth, and consequently, they cannot be tied exclusively to one social group.

With these four threads I have attempted to contrast *agama* as tradition with *agama* as religion. In what follows my goal is not to develop an alternative understanding of 'Javanese Islam' or 'Javanism' or redefine them in terms of tradition. After all, my claim is that Javanese religion is only an experiential entity in the Western experience of Java, and not an entity in Javanese reality. My aim, then, is to show that the few Javanese descriptions of Javanese *agama* (as tradition) we have, do show a certain consistency. We can map this consistency along the heuristic drawn from Balagangadhara's hypothesis. That is, we are looking for instances of performative, practical knowledge. So far, we have already been able to sketch *agama* as a tradition, i.e. as a fixed set of practices. In the paragraphs below, I will look at how the Javanese themselves seem to reflect on the *slametan* and *ngelmu*. Do these 'self-descriptions' show an inclina-

tion to performative or practical knowledge? Do they corroborate or rebut the conventional description in terms of ‘*agama* as religion’?

#### 7.4. The Javanese *slametan*: belief and praxis

As discussed in chapter five, two phenomena take a pivotal place in the description of Javanese religion: *slametan* and *ngelmu*. They are essential building blocks in this concept. Consequently, sooner or later one needs to deal with these two phenomena, both in descriptions of Javanese religion as a syncretist religion (Islamic or otherwise) and as a local Islam that has assimilated Javanese cultural elements. Here I will look at the possibility of a re-description of the *slametan*.

There is probably little (if any) disagreement that of all the Javanese traditions the *slametan* is the most essential. It is said to be at the very heart of the religious life of the Javanese (Geertz 1964 [1960]; Schweizer 1989: 297-98; Beatty 1999: 50). It is performed on momentous occasions such as circumcision, pregnancy, death, or on certain dates of the Muslim calendar such as the birth of the Prophet. It can be performed on its own, in a stand-alone fashion, or as a part of a larger ritual, e.g. local traditions such as *bersih desa* (cleaning of the village), the well-documented Yogyakarta *Labuhan* tradition at Mount Merapi, Mount Lawu and the beach of Parangkusumo (Adam 1940: 104-18; Bigeon 1982; Schlehe 1996), or in the *Petik Laut* in Puger Jember. The aim of a *slametan* is said to be the advancement of a state of *slamet*, which is usually described as a state of equanimity, a state ‘in which nothing happens’. However, the ritual is also often performed to secure the positive outcome of certain undertakings (e.g. a safe journey) or to rectify certain mishaps (e.g. Mulder 2005 [1998]: 43). Since the *slametan* is commonly a neighbourhood ritual, i.e. the participants are all from the same neighbourhood, it is said to cut across religious divides. Usually this means that Javanese Muslims, both those inclined to orthodoxy and the more nominal, join in the same ritual regardless of their religious dispositions. Consequently, the *slametan* is credited with raising (religious) tolerance and social harmony (e.g. Beatty 1999: 49-50).

The *slametan* has a fixed structure, which is consistently depicted in the same way (e.g. Geertz 1964 [1960]: 12-14; Hefner 1985: 104-10; Robson

1985: 634; Woodward 1988: 72-81; Schweizer 1989: 299-300; Koentjaraningrat 1989 [1985]: 346-48; Kim 1996: 112-15; Hilmy 1999: 54-59; Newberry 2007: 1309-15). This structure is usually described as follows. The preparation of the food for the prayer portion of the *slametan* is the activity in which the women are most involved. The guests (men only) usually are invited to the *slametan* by one of children of the host. In most cases this is not too long after sunset. When the guests arrive, they find the food for the actual prayer meal already displayed in the centre of the room. It traditionally consists of cones of yellow rice (*sega kuning*), side dishes of fish eggs, meat, vegetables, fruit, and tea. Usually incense is burned. The host delivers the *ujub*, an opening speech in which he states the purity of his intentions, the specific purpose of the *slametan* (e.g. the seventh month of the pregnancy of his daughter), and he apologises for his lack of eloquence and the inadequacy of the food. Subsequently, the prayer (*do'a* or *donga*) is pronounced, usually by the *modin* (mosque official). It often contains the *fatimah* (this is the first chapter of *Qur'an* and a common prayer in the Muslim world) but sometimes other more suited passages from the *Qur'an* are chosen. When the *modin* pronounces the last part of the *donga* the guests hold their palms up, and upon his pause say *amin*, rub their face with their palms as to absorb the blessings from heaven. After this, the *modin* is invited to start the meal. The food is divided, some is eaten on the spot, the rest is taken home by the guests.

Below, I will offer three different explanations of the *slametan* which, taken together, are representative of the current understanding in Javanese Studies. In a subsequent section I will contrast these with fragments of Javanese descriptions or reflections on the *slametan* ritual.

#### 7.4.1. The representation of *slametan* in Javanese Studies

In order to sketch the prevalent understanding of *slametan* I will draw on the explanations of three authors: Clifford Geertz, Andrew Beatty, and Mark Woodward. Although these authors might have disagreements as to the religious core of the *slametan* ritual, there is a remarkable convergence in the way they explain it.

Two caveats. Firstly, for the sake of argument, I deliberately ignore the diachronic dimension of the discussion of *slametan*. One could, after all,

argue that the *slametan* has over time become more and more Islamised. Therefore different explanations of the *slametan* can be brought back to their level of being Islamised. As fascinating as such a study would be, it is out of the ambit of my dissertation. Moreover, here I am concerned with the *way* the *slametan* is explained. Secondly, I do not deal with studies that treat the economic, political and social aspects of the *slametan*. It has for example been described as a ritual that reproduces the Indonesian state on a local level (Newberry 2007: 1324) or as a means of redistribution (Woodward 2011: 114-15). Whether or not the *slametan* has such functions, explanations of the *slametan* ritual itself, always (and seemingly inevitably) draw upon its meaning, i.e. on an underlying set of beliefs or a worldview. The following paragraphs illustrate this observation.

### **The *slametan* as an expression of the *abangan* worldview**

To Geertz the *slametan* is the core ritual of the *abangan* religion and understanding this ritual is the key to the *abangan* worldview. The purpose of the *slametan*, the state of *slamet*, is achieved by placating spirits who then after the *slametan* will no longer bother you. The world of the *slametan* participants is thus one inhabited by spirits and the *slametan* is the way to deal with them (Geertz 1964 [1960]: 14).

This understanding of the *slametan* as an expression of the animistic belief in spirits and their impact on human wellbeing has been picked up by many scholars in Geertz' wake. A good example is Thomas Schweizer's research into the "economic individualism" and "community spirit" of the Javanese. He recognises a reflection of the social sphere in the *slametan*, as well as an expression of certain Javanese values as they relate to the "individualism-communitarian dimension in Javanese society" (Schweizer 1989: 278). However, just as Geertz would have had it, the deeper sense of the *slametan* is religious and the performance of it finds its motivation in the Javanese worldview where the danger of losing one's *slamet* is averted by the implementation of the *slametan*:

"The harmonious implementation of a slametan in the community protects the affected person from these crises and is a plea for heavenly blessings on his life's path. These conceptions refer to the constitutive rules in the world-view and ethic of urban Javanese

and to the Hindu-Buddhist background of these beliefs.”  
(Schweizer 1989: 298)

This understanding of the *slametan* relies on the assumption that there is an underlying belief in spirits that motivates the Javanese to execute the ritual. The beliefs in turn are traced back to animist, or Hindu-Buddhist origins.

### **The *slametan* as the expression of a syncretist worldview**

The *slametan* is also often understood as a syncretist ritual. It can be interpreted so in two ways: as the expression of a syncretist worldview, or as a ‘syncretising’ of multiple worldviews. The latter interpretation will be discussed below. How does the *slametan* express a syncretist worldview? It does so by harbouring elements from different religious traditions that are *strictu sensu* incompatible, but somehow have been reconciled. The *ujub* and the *donga* are such elements. The *ujub* and the meal itself are regarded as an expression of the belief in spirits and deities -that is, of animism, ancestor worship or Hinduism. The *donga* is regarded as the expression of the belief in Allah -that is, of Islam. On this basis one can perceive a fundamental incompatibility. After all, the belief in Allah is predicated upon the principle of the unity of Allah, which strictly speaking implies that the worship of any other entity than Allah, such as Dewi Sri, Vishnu or an ancestor, constitutes *shirk* and thus is not permitted. However, while this is exactly what happens within the *slametan* ritual, it does not seem to pose a problem. Therefore, because of this ‘reconciliation’ of incompatible beliefs, the ritual is considered syncretist. Madras Hilmy’s understanding of *slametan* provides a variation to this explanation. To Hilmy, the *slametan* ritual is the expression of a Javanese Islamic worldview, which in its turn is characterised as essentially syncretist (1999: 48). Javanese Islam is thus seen as a syncretist blend of doctrines and beliefs that underlies ritual practices such as the *slametan*. Here too the representation of the *slametan* as syncretist is predicated upon the presence of doctrines or beliefs pertaining to a syncretist worldview.

### The syncretist *slametan* as the expression of multiple worldviews

In Andrew Beatty's thought provoking research on the practice of *slametan* in the area of Banyuwangi the above explanation receives a new twist: instead of just one worldview, the *slametan* actually expresses three worldviews. In Beatty's account the syncretist *slametan* ritual is explained as a way to reach societal harmony in the face of religious differences. Within the context of his fieldwork, Beatty distinguishes three religious groups: the *santri*, i.e. more orthodox or pious muslims; the village muslims, i.e. more nominal muslims; and the mystics, i.e. those who adhere to an indigenous spirituality which Beatty calls Javanism. The *slametan*'s symbolism is open to different interpretations according to the different religious affiliations of the participants:

"At the risk of overschematizing, one might say that the *santri* reads into the symbols an Islamic cosmogony; the ordinary indifferent villager places them in a familial context; and the mystic re-fers everything back to the self." (Beatty 1999: 38)

Each of these varying interpretations is actually the expression of a different world view, or in Beatty's words: "Each variant embodies -sometimes only suggests- a different conception of the world and one's place within it" (ibid.: 239). To Beatty a key part of the *slametan* ritual is public exegesis of the ritual's symbolism by which a systematic integration of very disparate ideas is achieved. Social compromise is then reached "by means of their combined expression in ritual" (ibid.: 40). Therefore, instead of the expression of one worldview, the *slametan* actually expresses three different worldviews and does so at the same time. This quality, which Beatty calls syncretism, enables social harmony and religious tolerance. In this study too, then, the *slametan* is described and understood as the embodiment of beliefs, of different worldviews. Only by virtue of describing the ritual as allowing the expression of different beliefs by persons of different religious persuasions, is it possible to regard the *slametan* as a syncretist ritual.



### The *slametan* as the expression of an Islamic worldview

Woodward, as we have seen in chapter five, argues that Javanese Islam is in fact Sufism, which is mystical Islam but most importantly truly Islam. During its expansion in Java it has assimilated, i.e. Islamised, pre-Islamic cultural and religious practices. As a result, the Javanese worldview is thoroughly Islamic and thus its key religious rituals such as the *slametan* as well.

Woodward makes his case on the basis of three points: the etymology of the term *slametan*, which is Islamic in origin; the widespread presence of communal meals in some way resembling the *slametan* throughout the Islamic world; the interpretation of the *slametan* in mystical Islamic, Sufi terms. It is the last point that deserves our attention here. Woodward argues that each separate element of the *slametan* can be given a Sufi interpretation. A case in point is the *tumpang* or the rice cones commonly served at the *slametan* meal. Although these cones have a Hindu, Buddhist or even animist origin, they should actually be understood as expressing Sufi cosmology, Woodward argues. He points out that in *Quranic* cosmology prayers and supplications move upwards, while divine blessing moves downwards. This cosmology is expressed in Sufi theories of the descent and ascent of the perfect man, and in the spatial orientation of prayer. The *slametan*, Woodward claims, replicates (i.e. expresses) these beliefs, as the cones channel prayers and supplication upward, while the obtained blessing enters the top of the cones and from there spreads over all the community. On this basis Woodward concludes:

“*Slametan* food, therefore, defines a local mode of the Islamic cosmos and is among the means through which blessing is attained and distributed.” (Woodward 2011: 125)

Woodward’s explanation of the *ujub* part of the *slametan* ritual is quite similar: even though the *ujub* might not be manifestly drawn from Arabic textual sources, it is certainly “motivated by Islamic religious concerns” (ibid.: 128). What does this imply? Firstly, Woodward interprets the host’s apologies for his lack of eloquence and the inadequacy of the offered food as instances of Islamic humility. Therefore, the Islamic value of humility is expressed in the *ujub*. Secondly, again according to Woodward, holding a *slametan* is actually a re-contextualisation or a mirroring of a story from the *Hadith* (ibid.: 128). As Woodward recounts this story,

the Prophet Muhammad is invited to a meal and then officiates at it, by dividing the food amongst those present and having the left-over food sent as a present to those afflicted with hunger (ibid.: 114). Woodward points out that the performative structure of the *slametan* parallels the narrative structure of the text: a man invites a group of people, including a religious leader, to his home; the wife has prepared the food; the religious leader distributes the food to the assembly; the remainder is distributed to the poor. According to Woodward the textual notion of charity as found in this text, and in particular the distribution of food, has “informed” ritual practice of *slametan*. In other words, the *slametan* expresses the Islamic virtue of charity. To Woodward, this ritual is thus indubitably an instance of an Islamicate cultural practice that is found all over the Islamic world. The Javanese perform this ritual because they believe it secures the blessing of Allah and the saints, and because they believe, that the distribution of the food to the poor is regarded as meritorious -similar or superior to the merits obtained from *zakat*. Finally, in Woodward’s explanation, the goal of the *slametan* is a mystical one, viz. the establishment of “...the social condition of union of servant and lord, which is believed to be essential if individuals and the community are to be truly *slamet* (...) *Slamet* is, therefore, not the social equivalent of *fana*’ (mystical union), but of *baqa*, the state of tranquillity to which the mystic returns” (ibid. 133; italics in original).

Whether Woodward’s explanation is convincing or not, is not the issue here. What is relevant though, is that every element of the *slametan* is understood as the expression of Islamic religious ideas, sentiments and beliefs<sup>82</sup>. The structure of the *slametan* is explained as a replica, or expression of an Islamic textual source. After all, “... mystical interpretations of Islam have served as paradigms for devotionism, social order, and social life ...” and therefore this “... in turn, suggests that contemporary

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<sup>82</sup> An interesting stance is that of Stuart Robson (1985) who takes the *slametan* ritual to be Islamic, as he considers the *donga* to be at the centre of the *slametan* ritual (ibid.: 638) and the ritual as belonging to the Islamic layer of Javanese cultural history (ibid.: 639). However, he also underscores the presence of non-Islamic elements, such as the placing of *sesajen* and burning incense that are of Hindu origin. He refers to the presence of such elements of different religious descent as the “complexity” of the *slametan*. It is this “complexity” that more orthodox Muslims reject (Ibid.:640). Could it be that Robson recognises some syncretism without using the term?

Javanese religion must be understood in light of fields of meaning established by the larger Muslim tradition”(ibid.: 113).

#### 7.4.2. The absence of Javanese descriptions of *slametan*

As must be obvious, the issue here is not which of the above descriptions is correct, but rather that each different understanding is predicated upon the same assumption: the *slametan* is the embodiment of religious beliefs or worldview. In the course of this dissertation I have argued that the crystallisation of ‘Javanese Islam’ and ‘Javanism’ took place within a Christian theological framework. Moreover, Javanese religion was constructed as symmetrical, though inferior, to Christianity. Within this construct *slametan* was designated an analogous position as the Lord’s Supper within Protestantism, or the Eucharist in Catholicism. *Slametan* was identified as the core ritual of Javanese religion, as evidence that the Javanese were also yearning for redemption, and as an indication of the level to which they were misguided. The only thing that has changed in contemporary descriptions of the *slametan* is that this explicitly theological framework has retreated into the background. Thus, the constraints within which syncretist Javanese Islam was conceived are still instanced in our current understanding of the *slametan*. The *slametan* understood in this way can be seen as a building block of the experiential entity that is syncretist ‘Javanese Islam’.

These descriptions of *slametan* were generated by members of a culture whose configuration of learning is dominated by theoretical knowledge, or knowing-about. Understanding the *slametan* entails that we know what it is. Because of prevalent epistemological constraints this has led to a description in terms of expressions of religious beliefs. If Javanese culture is a culture whose configuration of learning is dominated by practical knowledge, then a Javanese understanding of the *slametan* would focus on the knowing-how-to. However, it is ironic that virtually all the descriptions and explanations of the Javanese *slametan* we have, are from the hands of anthropologists or social scientists whose understanding is aligned to that of the missionaries. These accounts, then, are not the reflections of Javanese themselves, but only of the way scholars have made sense of Javanese traditions. Clearly, these anthropologists have had con-

versations with their informants on the topic of *slametan*, but let's not forget who asks the questions and to whom the answers need to make sense in order to count as intelligible. Given this basic fact, it is not surprising that it is difficult to find in these accounts the actual thoughts of a Javanese on the very subject of *slametan*.

If there is one scientific constraint we would expect an anthropological or ethnographic account on the *slametan* to meet, then at least that it dovetails with the way the Javanese themselves reflect upon it. We would expect to find such Javanese reflections on the *slametan* in the way they themselves describe this ritual. However, when from time to time a Javanese voice shimmers through, it actually raises doubts as to the veracity of the prevalent understanding of the *slametan*.

#### 7.4.3. The absence of worldviews in Javanese reflections on the *slametan*

One such instance we find in the mentioned research of Schweizer. As we saw, Schweizer claims that the motivation for holding a *slametan* is invoking heavenly blessings. This motivation in turn stems from a Javanese worldview with roots in Hindu-Buddhist beliefs. However, his research subjects themselves are not aware of any such motivations or underlying worldviews:

“But this connotation [of heavenly blessing and a Javanese, Hindu-Buddhist worldview] of the slametan was not known to the villagers. They generally fell back on the conventional explanation that the slametan, 'continue the tradition of the elders'." (Schweizer 1989: 298)

Schweizer does not explain what it means for an explanation to be conventional and we are left to guess what the relevance of this statement is. Could “conventional” here mean ordinary, in the sense that it is a standard answer, a common place, an answer an anthropologist hears often to his questions as to why the Javanese perform this or that ritual? Indeed, we find similar explanations in other accounts on *slametan* (cf. Beatty 1999: 111). However, here “conventional” also seems to indicate a kind of superficiality. It is as if Schweizer cannot accept that to “con-

tinue the tradition of the elders” is a sufficient and satisfying reason for performing a *slametan* ritual. There must be, according to Schweizer, a deeper meaning to the ritual, one that is religious (1989: 299). It seems as though, in the eyes of Schweizer, performing the ritual because your elders did so, just doesn’t seem to make sense. It doesn’t say enough, if it says anything at all.

This lack of information, this seeming unwillingness to explain, when Javanese are asked about their religion and religious rituals is a recurring theme in anthropological studies. For example:

“In spite of the bad reputation inflicted on them both by reformist Islam and by the coming of demystified society, supernatural beings still constitute a part of village life. They have been able to imprint their existence on the villagers’ belief system, expressing their willingness to assist them. *The lack of public conversation about them makes it difficult for outsiders to appraise the present state of belief in supernatural beings in villagers’ worldview.*” (Kim 1996: 155; italics mine)

I would like to point out two things. Firstly, Kim’s observation is not an isolated case. We come across remarks of this kind in a lot of the anthropological literature on Javanese rituals. Secondly, what is remarkable about this quote is not so much the “lack of public conversation” about “supernatural beings”, but rather Kim’s insistence that there is a Javanese worldview or belief system although the Javanese give no indication there even is such a worldview. After all, they themselves do not seem to be inclined to discuss it. A similar case is Beatty’s attempt to illicit an interpretation of the four coloured porridges at the centre of the *slametan*’s food offering. As he presses his informants for an explication of the meaning of the porridges, he notes that “... again, explicit interpretation is limited” (Beatty 1999: 41).

#### 7.4.4. Implicit interpretation and *kerata basa* as exegesis

In Beatty’s account this absence of explicit interpretation is an intricate part of the *slametan* ritual and allows for the multiple (even conflicting) interpretations that turn the *slametan* both into a syncretist ritual and into the hallmark of Javanese religious tolerance. How, then, should we understand this absence of explicit interpretation? It means that the Java-

nese (or minimally Beatty's informants) do not explicitly state what certain elements in the *slametan* mean or symbolise. Now, we have two possible conclusions to draw from this. Firstly, these elements, and perhaps the *slametan* as a whole as well, do not really mean anything. They do not express religious worldviews nor spiritual beliefs. Consequently, making sense of the *slametan* does not entail laying bare underlying beliefs or meanings -since there aren't any. Secondly, these elements and the *slametan* do have meaning, it just needs to be uncovered, that is interpreted. This, however, is not a straightforward affair (then we would have explicit interpretation), but rather complex and strenuous. By means of a discussion of the second option, I want to add plausibility to the first.

Beatty lists *kerata basa* (besides numerology) as the method *par excellence* by which the Javanese execute interpretations -he calls it exegesis. Anyone familiar with scholarly literature on Javanese religion has come across this practice at least a couple of times. One can even find early hints at it in the missionary accounts. Usually *kerata basa* is explained as wordplay or association of words. Bernard Arps describes it as chopping up words in different parts which are given separate meanings, so as to achieve an explanation of the original word (1992: 363-64; cf. Beatty 1999: 41-42). The achieved meanings can be quite alien to what one would expect. A case in point is an explanation of the Islamic term *Shahada* provided by the protagonist of the *Suluk Gatoloco*. In his "esoteric interpretation" he reads "sah" as *pisab* (separated) and "dat" as *adat*. Consequently, the "*shahadat*" comes to mean "separate from tradition", something quite different from the original gloss "evidence", or more particularly, 'evidence of being Muslim' (Anderson 1982: 40 fn. 150)<sup>83</sup>. While to some scholars this technique appears quite random, often arbitrary, even nonsensical, to others it hints at a deeper order, a hidden reality or inner harmonies. However, if we take it as a form of exegesis, i.e. as a critical explanation or interpretation of a text, scriptural or oral, that has to withstand logical scrutiny, then I think it is obvious we would be in a hard place to defend such a position. Therefore, I would propose that instead of looking at the *outcome* -i.e. the meaning and possible interpretation *kerata basa* undeniably delivers- we look at the *act* of *kerata basa*.

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<sup>83</sup> For other examples of *kerata basa* see e.g. Anderson 1981: 128 fn. 34, Mulder 2005 [1994]: 164.

After all, it seems that the activity of *kerata basa* itself is at least as important, if not more important, than its actual outcome. In his discussion of public readings of the *Lontar Yusup* in Banyuwangi, Arps shows how the discussion of the text is an important, even integral, part of the reading (1992: 361 ff.). Such discussions are a Javanese cultural phenomenon and they "... parallel debates (*bantab*) between learned people in shadow theatre and the 'deliberations of the *wali*' (*musawaratan para wali*) on theological matters, that are recounted in several literary works" (ibid.: 362-63; italics in original). Based on Arps's analysis I would propose that the process of discussion, the actual discussing, is at least as important, probably even more important, than the outcome of the discussion. Firstly, Arps observes how during these discussions the listeners not only follow the arguments but also derive pleasure from the discussions qua discussions. Secondly, the discussions seem not to be about the text in its entirety, nor about longer stretches of the text, but rather about specific elements such as words or images. Moreover, the discussions often digress away from the text to salient themes of Javanese cultural knowledge (*kawruh kejawen*). Lastly, establishing the meaning of the text ("arriving at the intentions of the ancestors") is subordinated to achieving consensus. This last point implies that discussions about the 'true meaning' of the text are avoided, since different strongly held opinions can result in disharmony (ibid.: 365)<sup>84</sup>. Even though the paragraph above deals with discussions of a particular text, the discussions sur-

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<sup>84</sup> Arps indicates that the meaning of the *Lontar Yusup* is important to both performers and listeners. Despite the fact that the chatting of the audience at times drowns the recitation, that mistakes in the reading result in gibberish, that the archaic wording makes the text generally obscure, still the recitation of the text is not mere ritual, but has a significance transcending the literature. The story's protagonist, Yusup, is an exemplary man because he remains virtuous. Ideal interpretation involves a link to reality either pertaining to the identity of the personages, a toponym, or sometimes the historical information conveyed (Arps 1992: 365). The application of the story to concrete social situations indicates the relevance of interpretation and meaning (ibid.: 378-79). However, some of Arps' observations seem to indicate that the matter of meaning might be subordinated to other concerns. "What counts artistically in reading sessions, then, is that the *Lontar Yusup* is made available for an enjoyment and possibly interpretation. Even more important is that it is voiced in such a way as to enable the ritual success of the session. There is thus neither the urge, nor indeed the necessity, to comprehend the text completely in all its details" (ibid.: 383). Furthermore, the reciters of *Lontar Yusup* claim they do not understand the language of the text, since it is Kawi. However, they still talk about the meaning and intention of the work in relation *to the way* it is recited (proper vs. improper "calling" of the text) and they talk about "perceiving the story within" (ibid.: 383-84).

rounding or following the *slametan* in Beatty's descriptions follow the same pattern. Here too, it appears that the discussion as an activity in itself seems to be more important than the actual meanings or interpretations it produces. Here too, harmony or consensus comes before achieving a truthful explanation. Moreover, in both instances *kerata basa* is applied.

#### 7.4.5. Meaning versus praxis

What then should we make of the 'implicit interpretation' Beatty hints at -as opposed to the explicit ones that are absent? Who is to say that the ritual is the embodiment of differing doctrines and meanings (i.e. beliefs)? If the anthropologist is met with reluctance to offer explicit interpretations, then who will say what the *slametan* means? Who, but the anthropologist? And why should we press for an understanding of the *slametan* in terms of an embodiment of beliefs and meaning, if the Javanese actors themselves do not seem to corroborate such a stance?

It is perhaps tempting to dismiss this reluctance to speak about supernatural beings and religious beliefs as either a shyness particular to the Javanese, or as fear for speaking up about such a sensitive matter -e.g. for fear of creating religious controversy or perhaps of risking reprisals. This strategy has two results. On the one hand, of course, we have 'saved' the prevalent explanation of the *slametan* in terms of underlying meaning, beliefs or worldview. On the other hand, there is also a price to pay. Firstly, *kerata basa* becomes a 'watered-down' version of exegesis as we know it in the West, by shifting the focus from the performance of interpretation (how) to its interpretative outcome (what). After all, it is difficult to insist that the practice of *kerata basa* displays the same critical stance and logical necessity we know from scrutinising Biblical texts. Secondly, we 'explain away' the muteness and reported 'nonsensicality' present in Javanese answers to the anthropologist's questions of meaning. Could it not be that this recurrent pattern points to something epistemologically relevant? Could it not be that this reluctance is an indication that the questions gauging the meaning of the *slametan* ritual are somehow 'off the mark'? Perhaps it just doesn't make sense to probe



what underlying beliefs or worldviews motivate the *slametan* ritual. Consider the following observation by Beatty:

“Most of the mystics reject the notion of a personal afterlife, yet like everyone else they take part in rituals directed, ostensibly, to the ancestors. Pak D., who told me bluntly that ‘death is the end of the story’, gave a feast at which he ‘sent prayers to the departed.’” (Beatty 1999: 173)

As Beatty stresses, this is not an instance that stands on its own, but rather something that happens on a regular basis: despite recurrent denial that there is a personal afterlife, people still engage in *slametan* rituals to illicit the “active intervention of the dead in the world of the living” (ibid.: 174). This kind of reasoning -or rather the absence of a certain kind or reasoning- seems to be structural, implying that the belief in an afterlife, or in supernatural beings for that matter, seems not to be the necessary condition for upholding a tradition such as the *slametan*. Consequently, if the performance of the *slametan* ritual is not predicated upon ancestor worship, animism or what-not, how then can these rituals be the expression of one or more of these worldviews? I propose to consider the possibility that they are not and that we instead approach the phenomenon of *slametan* as a practice.

#### 7.4.6. *Slametan* as a practice

One of the merits of Beatty’s account of the *slametan* is his constant focus on the actual performance of this ritual (1999). It is the practice itself he credits with bringing about social harmony and mutual tolerance. It is tempting to speculate that this ritual somehow brings about a skill, that enhances one’s capacity for social harmony. However, the absence of actual alternative, Javanese descriptions, withholds us from further probing this avenue.

We do have some snippets from the missionary accounts that illustrate how Javanese have approached the Lord’s Supper. These seem, at first sight, to corroborate the idea that practice comes first. Hoesoo, a contemporary and fellow missionary of Poensen and Harthoorn, made the following observation of how Javanese Christians treated two key elements of the Christian religion: the Our Father and the Lord’s Supper.

They did not understand it as the articles of faith, as a prayer to God, or as an expression of faith, but as a *ngelmu*.

“That the Our Father is being prayed or rather uttered, *without bothering about content and meaning*, is alas! often enough to be observed. Even the articles of faith (...) serve, instead of the old magic spells, to charm snakes or ward off evil spirits. How often is something read without taking the effort of asking for the sense and meaning of it, ...” (Hoezoo 1863: 177; italics mine)<sup>85</sup>

Poensen too, laments the absence of thoughtfulness in the execution of the *slametan* as well as a general neglect of the essence and the noble, solemn character of a true sacrifice (1866: 44). Furthermore, he contrast this negligence of the meaning of rituals with the Javanese preoccupation with form. Could this be an indication that the Javanese are more concerned with the ‘how-to’ than with the ‘what-is-it’?

Perhaps we should consider in the same light the recurring reports by Hoezoo and other missionaries about the preoccupation with the actual performance of a ritual being matched with a disinterest and ignorance about the religious belief that underlies it. In their eyes, the Javanese Christians (or the Javanese Muslims for that matter) did not understand their Christian teachings. That they had a soul, that salvation in the here-after is to be earned in this life, that Jesus had died on the cross for our sins, etc.: all this was both incomprehensible and utterly unimportant to the Javanese. What did matter was ritual and its correct execution:

“When people noticed, that I had slightly changed the regular religious Sunday worship [i.e. the Lord’s Supper] compared to what had been customary, I heard mumbling about it, and even talk about a request to follow the old custom in it. And I could mention other instances that prove that many are far from acknowledging the missionary in his true relation to the congregation, but

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<sup>85</sup> My translation of: “Dat het Onze Vader wordt gebeden of liever uitgesproken, zonder dat men zich bekommert om inhoud en beteekenis, is helaas! dikwijls genoeg op te merken. Zelfs moeten de geloofsartikelen of eenig ander formulier soms dienen, in plaats van de oude tooverspreuken, om slangen te bezweren of booze geesten te verdrijven. Hoe dikwijls wordt er ook gelezen zonder verstand, terwijl men zich de moeite niet geeft, om naar zin en bedoeling te vragen, ...”

rather see him as its *loerah*, who first of all has to look after the correct observance of its institutions.” (Hoezoo 1863: 178)<sup>86</sup>

Strikingly, the way the Javanese Christians regarded the Protestant ministers is identical to the way they looked upon the *modin*. Brumund notes in his work regarding the evangelisation of Java, that the Javanese villagers regard the *modin* as the one that is being paid to take care of religious matters. He has to take care of praying, reading the Qur’an and going to the *mesjid*, so they themselves need not to worry about these things (Brumund and Brumund 1854: 70). The *modin* then is a ritual specialist. Taken together, these observations seem to illustrate the Javanese stance towards ritual, including the *slametan*: they see it as praxis pure and simple, and not as the expression of a belief. Their concern is with the correct execution of it and not with its meaning. If this stance indicates anything at all, then at least an inclination to performative knowledge (how-to) rather than to theoretical knowledge (what-is).

#### 7.5. Instead of a conclusion

We started this chapter with the suggestion that syncretist Javanese Islam is an experiential entity. This implies that it is an entity in the Western experience of but not an actual entity in Javanese culture. A first indication that this is the case can be found in the genealogy of ‘Javanese Islam’ and ‘Javanism’ which clearly shows the crystallisation over time of the *Gestalt*, the construct that is Javanese religion. Subsequently, we have reiterated the observation that Christian theology has constrained the West’s descriptions and experience of certain aspects of Javanese culture. The result is a conception of Javanese religion symmetrical to Semitic religions.

As an experiential entity syncretist ‘Javanese Islam’ or ‘Javanism’ helped generations of Westerners to come to terms with Javanese cultural real-

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<sup>86</sup> My translation of: “Toen men had opgemerkt, dat ik de gewone godsdienstoefeningen des zondags eenigszins anders inrigtte, dan vroeger gebruikelijk was, hoorde ik daarover mompen, en zelfs spreken van een verzoek, om daarin de oude gewoonte te volgen. En zoo zou ik nog andere dingen kunnen noemen, evenzeer ten bewijze, dat velen wel verre van den zending in ware verhouding tot de gemeente te erkennen, hem veelmeer beschouwen als haar loerah, die in de eerste plaats voor de getrouwe naleving harer instellingen te zorgen heeft.”

ity. If we dismiss this entity as non-existing, then a logical question ensues: what is the alternative?

At this point I have brought in Balagangadhara's hypothesis on cultures as configurations of learning. I use Balagangadhara's suggestion that Asian culture is a configuration of learning where performative knowledge is dominant as a heuristic. In other words, I scrutinise the available sources for traces that hint at 'practical knowledge'.

Ideally, this heuristic would help us generate alternative descriptions of *agama* and of *slametan* and *ngelmu*. On the basis of such alternative descriptions we could proceed to a better understanding of Javanese cultural reality. *Slametan* has been discussed in this chapter, and *ngelmu* will be in the following. However, since there is a virtually complete lack of descriptions of *slametan* by Javanese themselves, it is impossible at this stage to generate true alternative descriptions<sup>87</sup>. For the time being, therefore, we can do no more than scrutinise the way *slametan* has been conceived. The analysis in this chapter shows that the *slametan* is not motivated by religious beliefs, nor is it an expression or embodiment of religious beliefs. I have argued this on two points. Firstly, Javanese analysis, interpretation, and explanation of *slametan*, such as *kerata basa*, does not offer conclusive proof that the *slametan* is motivated by beliefs, nor that they are expressions of belief. It seems that the performance of such explaining is more important, or minimally as important, as its result, viz. the explanation. Therefore, the act of 'explaining' the ritual, becomes performance as well. Secondly, Javanese testimonies contradict that their motivation for holding a *slametan* is located in religious beliefs. In fact, it seems that the correct execution of any ritual (including the *slametan*) is of much greater importance than its (purported) meaning. In the following chapter I will discuss *ngelmu* as an instance of practical knowledge.

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<sup>87</sup> Prof. Arps has pointed out to me that the *Serat Centhini* contains many references to *slametan*. This famous compilation of Javanese tales and teachings was composed in 1814 and is attributed to Susuhunan Pakubuwono V of Surakarta. I have not yet been able to scrutinise this and/or other Javanese texts for Javanese descriptions of and reflections on the *slametan*. Such an enterprise might provide both a test case for the suggestions put forward above and might further help generating an alternative understanding of the ritual.





## 8. A new avenue? *Ngelmu* and agama

In the previous chapter I have drawn attention to how the current descriptions of the *slametan* turn it into the expression of a worldview, or certain religious beliefs. I have argued that we have sufficient reasons to doubt the accuracy of such an understanding. One of my points was that the Javanese, by avoiding any motivation in terms of doctrines or beliefs, seem to understand the *slametan* tradition as praxis pure and simple. Drawing upon the hypothesis of cultures as configurations of learning processes, we could describe this situation as follows. Descriptions of the *slametan* generated within Western culture focus on the ‘what’ of *slametan*. Because of a certain set of constraints, these descriptions turn the *slametan* into a ritual symmetrical to the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist. Indications of this are the central role it has in the construct that is ‘Javanese Islam’ and the way it is rendered intelligible as an embodiment or expression of certain religious beliefs. Alternatively, a description of a ritual such as the *slametan* generated within an Asian, *in casu* Javanese, culture would focus on the ‘how’ of the *slametan*. Unfortunately, there are very few descriptions of *slametan* by the practitioners themselves. One important step towards future research therefore would be to generate such descriptions. I have suggested to use the hypothesis on configurations of learning as a heuristic. The remainder of this chapter ties in with this suggestion, as I will attempt to render some fragments of an alternative description of *ngelmu*.

### 8.1. Javanese *Ngelmu*: religious belief or practical knowledge?

In the following paragraphs I will attempt to sketch an alternative conceptualisation of *ngelmu*. For this I will draw mostly on one particular Javanese text, *Serat Wedhatama*. Later on, I will add observations and ‘Javanese descriptions’ drawn from other sources such as missionary accounts and literary texts that have contributed to the construction of syncretist ‘Javanese Islam’ and ‘Javanism’. Before that, I will show how

*ngelmu* is portrayed and described in the accounts on religion in Java. I will contrast this with the way the Javanese themselves seem to talk about and use this *ngelmu* in the mentioned sources. As we saw, in the accounts of the missionaries Poensen, Harthoorn and Hoezoo, *ngelmu* was described as a kind of a doctrine or a belief. This has been the preferred understanding of *ngelmu* ever since. In the following paragraphs, however, I will argue that there are sufficient reasons to conceptualise *ngelmu* as a specific kind of knowledge, viz. a practical knowledge<sup>88</sup>.

A treatment of the discussion of whether or not *ngelmu* is an Islamic concept would be too much of a digression here. Suffice to note that *ngelmu* is the Javanised version of the Arabic loanword *ilm*, which means science, knowledge, doctrine. A scholar like Woodward might argue that the concept is deeply and essentially Islamic and is understood by the Javanese in this fashion (2011: 77-79). There are however, also indications that *ngelmu* has a particular Javanese meaning. One of these indications is how, in certain instances of Javanese literature<sup>89</sup>, *ngelmu* seems to be used interchangeably with the Javanese term *kawruh*. This truly Javanese term also refers to knowledge, usually knowledge of a mystical nature. Unfortunately, as far as I have been able to establish, little to no research has been performed regarding Javanese conceptions of knowledge. Therefore, I will take this seeming convergence of *ngelmu* and *kawruh* at face value, i.e. as an indication that at least in certain instances *ngelmu* has a specific, Javanese meaning. A second indication is the way *ngelmu* has been used by the Javanese both in day-to-day situations and in certain types of Javanese literature. In the following paragraphs, I will argue that, in these contexts, *ngelmu* is used as meaning practical knowledge. Before that, we need to have a look at the more common understanding of *ngelmu* in terms of belief.

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<sup>88</sup> My suggestion here does not preclude other possible meanings of the word *ngelmu*. For the purpose of my argument, however, I will focus on one possible meaning solely.

<sup>89</sup> Examples are e.g. found in Serat Wedhatama (Robson 1990), Serat Dermagandhul (Drewes 1966). Interestingly, Patty (1986) contains an extensive list of different *aliran kebatiman* sects. Numerous of these have the term *kawruh* in their name, as a reference to the knowledge they dissipate.



### *Ngelmu* as religious belief, mystical doctrine and magic

When the Protestant missionaries came across the phenomenon of *ngelmu*, they identified it as the religious beliefs of the Javanese. It helped them to make sense of the Javanese religious landscape. However, *ngelmu* was not understood as just a religious belief, but as a false religious belief. Localising the false beliefs of the Javanese was a point of departure for the conversion efforts of the missionaries. Their initial hope was that by showing the falsity of *ngelmu* they could bring the Javanese to the true faith of Protestant Christianity. As we saw, things turned out to be not that simple.

Today *ngelmu* seems to be understood as either magical or as mystical knowledge. Both stances have their roots in the genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism'. In the first instance, *ngelmu* is often equated with magic. Already in the accounts of the missionaries we come across this connotation, making it suspect from the outset. In this context *ngelmu* is the stock-in-trade of the (not so Islamic?) *kyai* and *dukun*. The missionary accounts tell numerous stories about travelling *kyai* who had gathered an array of *ngelmu* and would for a small retribution (money, food) put their *ngelmu* to work for ordinary Javanese villagers (cf. Hefner 1985: 189-96). There are *ngelmu* for protection against illness and spirits, others to become invulnerable, or to guarantee prosperity, etc. (e.g. Hoekema 1997: 132, 136, 142). Criminals too would secure themselves of the protection and benefits of such *ngelmu* (Schulte Nordholt and Till: 1999: 51). Interestingly, a *dukun bayi* (midwife) also possesses *ngelmu* although one could argue just how magical instead of plain practical her knowledge is. Even in more recent times the *dukun* and his/her *ngelmu* are still very much part of the Javanese cultural landscape. John Pemberton notes the application of *ngelmu* in wedding preparations, and the popularity of night vigils so as to acquire the *ngelmu* of invulnerability (Pemberton 1994: 210, 272-74). Steve Ferzacca describes the still potent role of the *dukun* in the late Suharto era despite the advent of modernity (2010: 29-30; cf. Woodward 2011: 69-111).

In the second instance, *ngelmu* is usually conceived of as esoteric knowledge (e.g. Anderson 1981: 112; Guinness 2009: 124-25; Hefner 2011: 77). In this context *ngelmu* is understood as an esoteric doctrine, something only the true initiated can understand. This is the context of the mysti-

cism of the *tarekat* (Sufi order) and the *aliran kebatinan* (mystical sect). As we saw, such groups are centred around a teacher who has mastered one (or several) *ngelmu* and has devised a way to pass on this *ngelmu*. For example, it has been argued for example that one of Wali Sanga, Sunan Gunung Jati, might have learned his *ngelmu* from the *tarekat* Kubrawiyya (Van Bruinessen 1994a: 312). *Ngelmu* is also taught within the *aliran kebatinan/kepercayaan* (Patty 1986: 145; Mulder 2005 [1998]: 53). Whether this mystical knowledge is truly Islamic or essentially Javanese is a matter of debate, which is out of the scope of our present discussion. However, such discussions tend to turn these *ngelmu* into pieces of religious belief. Consider, for example, how Zoetmulder and Woodward treat *ngelmu kesempuran* (*ngelmu* of the perfect man) in terms of doctrine and even theory (Zoetmulder 1935: 339-53, Woodward 1989: 177-84). In such instances, discussing the nature of a *ngelmu* -is it purely Islamic or not, is it Sufism or not, is it heretical Islam or not, is it actually Javanese, etc.- is more often than not executed on the premiss that these *ngelmu* are doctrines that can (or cannot) be traced back to a textual source. Subsequently, based on the presence or absence of such a source it is argued that this particular piece of esoteric knowledge in question is Islamic, Javanese, or both.

In the following paragraphs I will contrast this understanding of *ngelmu* as a belief, doctrine, or even theory, with an interpretation of *ngelmu* in terms of practical knowledge. The former interpretation dovetails with the 'orientalist' conception of 'Javanese Islam', and of the *slametan* as its central ritual which in turn expresses the Javanese Islamic world view. The Javanese belief system, or at least a part of it, is thought to be captured in these esoteric, mystical doctrines, viz. in *ngelmu*. The alternative description is guided by the heuristic drawn from the hypothesis on configurations of learning: if Javanese culture is an Asian culture, and if such a culture is a configuration of learning in which performative knowledge is dominant, then we should find expressions of that in the way the Javanese themselves reflect on their own traditions. As we will see, the *Serat Wedhatama* contains such reflections. The result of my query is at best a partial alternative description of *ngelmu*. I do not claim it is conclusive. However, taken together with the characterisation of *agama* as tradition and the suggestion that *slametan* is pure practice, I hope to show at least the epistemological productivity of this approach.

## 8.2. Javanese didactic writings

In this chapter I will focus on a particular genre of Javanese literature, viz. that of moralistic and didactic writings. Javanese literature knows of different kinds of this genre. Well known are the *suluk* and *primbon*. Both deal "... with Muslim mysticism tinged with pre-Muslim Javanese religious speculation" (Uhlenbeck 1964: 123). While the *suluk* is a song and has a coherent structure, the *primbon* is most often a collection of notes on diverging topics. The first is in *tembang* metre, the second is in prose. While the *primbon* can (but must not) have a mystical element, a *suluk* always has a mystical dimension. Both have been studied intensively. Such studies, developed in the wake of Snouck Hurgronje, have contributed greatly to the current understanding and conceptualisation of 'Javanese Islam', in both its syncretist and assimilated variant<sup>90</sup>. An example from one end of the spectrum is a 16th century *primbon* attributed to Sunan Bonang, one of the Wali Sangga. Both Hendrik Kraemer (1921) and Gerardus J.W. Drewes (1954) regard this *primbon* as an instance of orthodox Islamic mysticism. This is argued on the presence of many quotations drawn from Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), the great Muslim thinker who is credited for having synthesised Islamic orthodoxy with Sufi mysticism (Kraemer 1921: 10). At the other end of the spectrum we may find such works as the already mentioned *Suluk Gatoloco*. Though no less mystical and esoteric, it is considered highly critical of Islam and it is in no sense orthodox (e.g. Anderson 1981: 110; Ricklefs 2007: 186, 191-95). Another excellent example is Zoetmulder's study (1935) into monistic, i.e. leaning to Islamic orthodoxy, and pantheistic, i.e. leaning to heresy and more 'Javanese', instances of *suluk* literature.

The kind of didactic text I will be focussing on below, is the *pinulang* (or *pitutur*). This genre of didactic poems is different from both the *primbon* and *suluk* in that the author is giving advice and admonitions to his readers. Usually, an older person is divulging knowledge to youngsters (Robson 1990: 4). A *pinulang* is therefore an instruction, a teaching, or a lesson. Most *pinulang* are concerned with: "... teaching values and standards of behavior and, in that sense, can be considered outlines of proper moral conduct in the Javanese way of life." (Atmosaputro and Hatch

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<sup>90</sup> For a brief overview of discussions of *primbon* and *suluk*, and other moralistic and didactic writing, see e.g. Uhlenbeck (1964: 123-25).

1972: 157) Despite its long heritage -the oldest known *pivulang*, the *Sutusiasana* (Instruction for sons), was written ca. 1465 by Mpu Tanakung (Robson 1990: 4)- most of the *pivulang* now available were composed after the middle of the eighteenth century. Well-known examples include *Sevaka* (Wilkens 1851); *Nitisastra*, *Niti Sruti*, *Niti Praja*, *Wulang rèh*, *Wulang Sunu*, *Wulang Estri* by Pakubuwana IV, Susuhunan of Surakarta (r. 1788-1820); and *Serat Sanasunu* by Yasadipura II, court poet of Surakarta until 1844.

### 8.3. *Ngelmu* as depicted in the *Serat Wedhatama*

Here I will discuss some aspects of the *Serat Wedhatama* attributed to prince Mangkunegara IV of Surakarta (1811-81, r. 1853-81) who is famous for being both an outstanding statesman and a remarkable poet (Robson 1999: 34-35). He was a prolific writer and amongst the many *serat pivulang* by his hand the *Serat Wedhatama* truly stands out. It is considered an exemplary *pivulang* as it, according to Atmosaputro and Hatch, stresses basic Javanese values, expresses a positive and energetic attitude toward life, and is often highly mystical in nature.

“The poem rapidly became very popular outside the court and even today many people still memorize it and chant it privately in their homes or publicly on religious and social occasions.” (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 157).

Despite its popularity, it is clear the teachings are not intended for all people, but only for a certain social group, viz. for the “... larger group of nobility of Central Java: members of the Kasunanan house of Surakarta, its junior partner the Mangkunagaran, the Sultanate of Yogyakarta and its offshoot the Pakualaman” (Robson 1990:4). That is, the nobility of Central Java who consider themselves the descendants of Senapati, the first king of Mataram.

Literally, *Wedhatama* can mean “exalted wisdom” or “highest wisdom”<sup>91</sup>. In what follows I will try to circumscribe this most exalted knowledge.

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<sup>91</sup> Prof. Wieringa has pointed out that both “exalted wisdom” and “highest wisdom” are approximate translations, and other “literary” translations, such as “excellent teachings” are also possible.

However, I will not offer a new translation nor a detailed philological discussion of the text. Today there are minimally three excellent translations available: the 1941 translation by the renowned ‘Javanicus’ P.J. Zoetmulder; the 1972 translation by Suranto Atmosaputro, a lecturer in Javanese language and culture in Surakarta, and Martin Hatch, scholar of Javanese performing arts; and the translation from 1990 by Stuart Robson, eminent Javanese linguist, whose translation has become the current standard scholars tend to refer to. Unless explicitly indicated, I will make use of the translation by Atmosaputro and Hatch. I will contrast it with the other two translations to discuss several key passages. The Javanese transcript is that by Robson. Following the heuristic as laid out above, my focus will be on the way knowledge is depicted. The choice for the *Serat Wedhatama* should be obvious: we are dealing with a didactic poem, meaning its intention is to disseminate knowledge and, more specifically, spiritual and moral knowledge. Furthermore, this text is described as a prime example of a *Javanese* didactic text. There is therefore a justified hope that we can find here a Javanese description of knowledge, or rather of *ngelmu*.

For the purpose of generating a ‘Javanese description’ of *ngelmu*, it suffices to know that the author (Mangkunagara IV) is teaching his pupils (sons) how to become proper Javanese noblemen, by showing them which examples to follow and not to follow. The end of the text deals with four specific practices that ultimately lead to the highest knowledge the text is named after. In the discussion below, I will gradually add more details. I will attempt to come to an approximation of a Javanese understanding of *ngelmu*, one that can serve as an alternative to the current one. I do so with help of five questions.

### 8.3.1. For whom is this *ngelmu* intended?

From the outset Mangkunagara IV makes clear that this knowledge is not intended for just anybody. After all, this knowledge pertains to the religion which belongs to the king (*agama ageming aji*, I.1). In other words this knowledge is befitting for Javanese noblemen, i.e. *priyayi*.

We need to make two reservations. Firstly, Mangkunagara points out that “real knowledge” is found in old and young men, of high and low class

(*Wrubanira mungguh sanyataning ngèlmu / Tan pasti nèng janma wreda / Tuwin muda sudra kaki*, I.11). This seems to indicate that the knowledge his pupils should strive for is not exclusive to their social group. However, his teachings are explicitly directed only at youngsters from a distinct social group. One way of tackling this seeming contradiction is to consider that *ngelmu* here means both the process of learning as well as the end-result. Consequently, I suggest that Mangkunagara is disclosing a way or process of learning specific for one social group. The end-result, i.e. “real knowledge”, however is attainable by each and every social group, in all probability by other processes. Secondly, there seems to be one group of people where this knowledge is not to be found: those who follow the way of the Prophet. Their constant preoccupation with ritual and with showing off their theological skills leads them away from “real knowledge”. We will return to this point that later on.

### 8.3.2. What is the result of this *ngelmu*?

The result of the *ngelmu* is spiritual and moral excellence. The moral dimension is apparent in what the students should and should not do, how they should and should not behave. For example: it is not befitting to grope for compliments; it is befitting to think before one speaks, etc. Rather, one should hide one’s feelings behind a pleasant expression, and be indifferent when called ignorant, etc. The spiritual dimension lies in the teaching of meditation or asceticism and the aim of equanimity. Only through mastering one’s urges, emotions, and desires will one be able to see the truth and achieve one’s goals.

Three comments. Firstly, asceticism or meditation is not a goal in itself, but rather a practice from which one will reap certain benefits<sup>92</sup>. On sev-

<sup>92</sup> I would like to stress that I am not taking the characterisation of asceticism or meditation (i.e. *tapa*) as a kind of *ngelmu* in the *Serat Wedhatama* as the generally accepted Javanese understanding of it. Other sources, from different periods, might provide differing renditions of the term *tapa* (e.g. Drewes 1954). Ann Kumar’s analysis of the text *Sasana Sunu* by Yasadipura II from ca. 1819 features a discussion of the *tapa* in terms of penance through self-mortification (1997: 399-411, esp. 403-404). At face value her rendition of *tapa* seems to converge with my suggestions. However, it is impossible to learn from Kumar’s analysis whether Yasadipura II regards *tapa* as a kind of *ngelmu*, as Mangkunagara IV seems to do. Moreover, she does not offer a complete translation of the *Sasana Sunu*.

eral occasions Mangkunagara IV speaks of such benefits. For example Ratu Kidul's<sup>93</sup> intention is to ask Senapati for the benefits of his asceticism (II.5). One of these benefits is that by mastering this asceticism one will become able to achieve one's goals. Secondly, Mangkunagara IV speaks about Senapati as the highest example of *behaviour* for the Javanese. Therefore, the imparted knowledge shows one *how* to be a moral and spiritual Javanese person. This is to say, Mangkunagara IV is not so much saying *what* this behaviour is, but rather, *how* one needs to (and needs not to) behave in order to be a proper Javanese nobleman. Thirdly, it also seems to imply that there is a difference between what is and what is not suitable as *ngelmu* for a Javanese person.

### 8.3.3. What kind of *ngelmu* is disseminated?

It is the highest *ngelmu* that Mangkunagara IV disseminates. I will try to circumscribe the particular knowledge by summing up the different ways Mangkunagara IV characterises it.

Firstly, the knowledge imparted is not an ordinary kind of knowledge. It is translated differently in the three renditions I am using: "secret knowledge" (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 163), or "noble science" (Robson 1990: 21), or "exalted science" or "doctrine of life" (*levensleer*) (Zoetmulder 1941: 182) (*ngèlmu lubung*, I.11). It is not clear to me what is meant by this knowledge being secret. It being exalted or noble, however, seems in line with the title of the text. Not being a philologist of Javanese language, then, I am not in a position to say which of these translations is the most apt. However, we can see a clear difference in translation of *ngelmu*: as knowledge on the one hand, and as science or doctrine on the other. As I hope to show in the following pages this difference in translation is also indicative of a difference in interpretation and understanding.

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<sup>93</sup> Ratu Kidul is the mythological queen of the South-Sea to whom each Sultan of Yogyakarta is married in succession to Senapati. The annual *Labuhan* at the beach of Parangkusumo is dedicated to Ratu Kidul and serves as a reaffirmation of this original union of Ratu Kidul with the Yogyakarta court.

Secondly, this knowledge pertains to the land of Java. This means that this knowledge is indigenous to Java. Moreover, it is characterised as the religion of the king (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 163), or the tradition adhered to by the king (Robson 1990:21; Zoetmulder 1941: 182) (*agama ageming aji*, I.1). It is unambiguously set apart from Islam, which is not considered Javanese knowledge (cf. III.6-7)<sup>94</sup>. Moreover, Islam is considered to be the way of a specific social group, viz. the *kaum* (the pious, professional religious community), and not of the *priyayi*, the social group Mangkunagara IV and his pupils belong to.

Thirdly, Mangkunagara IV characterises this knowledge as true knowledge: truly giving gladness to the heart. (*Mangkono ngèlmu kang nyata / san-yatané mung wèh reseping ati*, I.5). Thus, it seems this knowledge enables one to attain happiness. Happiness is circumscribed as remaining equanimous, for the happy person does not grope for compliments, is not pretentious, not confrontational, does not mind insult, but rather is modest and succinct in speech (I.5-6). The happy man is connected with that core of good conduct which is part of a holy religion (*Gon-anggon agama suci*, I.7). This characterisation ties in with the spiritual and moral dimension pointed out above.

Fourthly, this knowledge is distinct from magic (*ngèlmu-karang*, I.9). Mangkunagara IV warns his pupils for magic, which he says is only superficial. True knowledge, however, is achieved by asceticism which implies perseverance and diligence. It is interesting to note that magic is presented as a kind of *ngelmu*. It seems to imply that magic is but one kind of *ngelmu* amongst several.

Fifthly, as the text progresses, especially in Canto IV, the descriptions of the highest knowledge become increasingly unintelligible. I suggest this has to do with the nature of this knowledge. It is a knowledge that is achieved through praxis, it is knowledge that is experiential by nature. That is to say one knows, only when one has experienced it. One cannot know or understand by merely reading the text of *Wedbatama*, one has to

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<sup>94</sup> It is important to point out that the evaluation of Islam as reflected in the *Serat Wedbatama* can be regarded a product of its time. At other moments Islam may have been appreciated differently. However, my interest here is in the way Islam is set apart as a kind of knowledge from Javanese knowledge and not as a religion from another religion.



follow its directions, perform, practice, and experience. Only then one will know.

#### 8.3.4. How is this *ngelmu* taught?

The way this knowledge is taught is by example. From the outset, Mangkunagara IV points out who is and who is not a good example, whose actions and behaviour one should and should not follow.

#### A proper example

The proper or good example is to be imitated, the bad or improper example is to be avoided. A proper example are the “wise men who have already done asceticism” (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 165) or “scholars who live an austere life” (Robson 1990: 25) (*martapi*, I.11). The example par excellence is Senapati, the founder of the Mataram dynasty: “... all young men should imitate the highest example of behavior for people in the land of Java -- that of the great man of Mataram, Panembahan Senapati.” (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 165, 167). Robson translates this slightly differently as: “And hence, young people, take as model an excellent rule of life appropriate to the people of Java: That of the great Man of Mataram, Panembahan Senapati.” (Robson 1990: 26-27). The difference is in “example of behavior” versus “rule of life” (*Nulada laku utama*, II.1). I would suggest it makes more sense that Mangkunagara IV advises his pupils to imitate Senapati’s *behaviour*, since, as will become more and more apparent, the kind of knowledge that is being taught seems to be practical knowledge. In this context, ‘taking as a model a rule of life’, seems to make little sense.

Why is Senapati such a good example? Firstly, Senapati always practised gentleness when meeting others, he practised asceticism, he constantly strived for the target of his will, for clearness of heart, he “sucked up the old, ripe way” (could this mean tradition?) so as to achieve clear insight into intentions, striving for calmness in his feelings, the serenity of virtuous thought, he disciplined himself in love for his fellow-man (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 167). Secondly, as result of Senapati’s pact or marriage with the Queen of the South Sea, Ratu Kidul, his off-

spring is able to quickly achieve what it wishes for, if they train or strive with their minds (*jèn ama sab mesu budi*, II.6). These are Senapati's merits and it befits his descendants to take these merits as their example (*ibid.*: 169).

### **An improper example**

If Senapati is a good example for the nobility of Java, then what would not be a good example? For those who want to rule Java, the Prophet is not a proper example. Why? Because, "young men who indulge themselves in imitating the Prophet, the leader of the world, our lord messenger, always use this indulgence boastfully" (*ibid.*: 169). Even though they constantly practise Islamic rituals, they do not know its essence. In other words, they are absorbed in showing off. Mangkunagara IV admonishes his pupils not to be eager for compliments when imitating the way of the scholars of Islam. Therefore, the reason Mangkunagara IV rejects following the way of the Prophet, is that this way is contra-productive for suppressing one's emotions, for achieving calmness of mind, etc.

It is important to note that Mangkunagara IV advises not to follow the *way* of the scholars of Islam. Hence, he does not advise not to follow Islam, but rather not to be overzealous in it. His warning is not so much against imitating the example of the Prophet, as it is against *persistently* imitating it. For his pupils a little suffices, given the fact that they are Javanese (*rèhné ta sira Jawi / sathibik baé nus cukup*, II.10). In other words, for the Javanese there is a Javanese *way* to obtain the desired state, or true knowledge. And, as we have seen already, this way is exemplified by Senapati.

### **It is proper to stick to one's own tradition**

Mangkunagara IV explains that when he was a young man, he himself knew a period of religious zeal (*abérag marang agama*, II.12), taking lessons from any passing *bajji*. During that period, he would worry greatly about the Last Judgement. However, being summoned by his master (him who gives food) every day, was like facing such a judgement on a daily basis. This made him question who was more important: Allah or the king

(Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 171; Robson 1990: 33; Zoetmulder 1941: 189)? Mangkunagara IV came to understand something essential:

“Gradually I realized that,  
because I was a son of a *prijaji*,  
if I wanted to be a *kaum*, that would be contemptible

or a *ketib* or *suragama*<sup>95</sup>.  
I am not a descendant of these people.  
It is better if I stick  
to the order of the necessities of life,  
the way of veneration  
of the traditions of my ancestors;  
from the old times  
up to now, ...”

(Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 171)

Here it is obvious that as a *prijayi*, Mangkunagara IV and his sons have their own traditions, including their own traditions of veneration and spirituality. Therefore, Mangkunagara IV sees Islam as just another avenue next to the Javanese avenue. Being Javanese and *prijayi*, it is proper to follow the Javanese way and not the way of the *kaum*. It does not imply that Mangkunagara IV is opposed to Islam -a little can't hurt and might even be beneficial- it is just not the way of the Javanese. Therefore the example to follow must be a Javanese example and cannot be a non-Javanese example. This, I would argue, indicates an essential part of the Javanese understanding of *agama*. It seems indeed to be understood as a tradition, i.e. as a *practice* handed down from generation to generation.

### 8.3.5. How is this *ngelmu* learned?

This *ngelmu* is learned, obtained, through practice. The *Serat Wedhatama* deals with ‘true knowledge’, which in turn is only possible if one has subdued one’s passions, and mastered one’s will and intentions. This is achieved by ‘striving with one’s mind’ (ibid.: 167) (*jèn amasab mesu budi*, II.6), ‘sharpening one’s mind’ (ibid.: 167, 171), or ‘applying oneself to

<sup>95</sup> Robson notes that the term *suragama* is not featured in any dictionary, he speculates that it refers to a specific group of servants, *in casu* armed clergy (Robson 1990: 52-53).

mental discipline' (Robson 1990: 29) (*Masab amamasuh budi*, II.17). Obviously, then, this kind of knowledge is not obtained through reading books or listening to sermons for example. Rather, it is obtained by praxis. This is why Mangkunagara IV urges his sons or students: "After you have received the revelation from God, be quick to become clear and able to *work* on spiritual knowledge, able to get knowledge of how to die -- the end of being" (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 165; italics mine). In Robson's translation this has become "Whoever obtains God's revelation soon shines at the *practice* of the science of insight" (1990: 25; italics mine). (*Sapantuk wahyuning Allah / Gya dumilah mangulah ngèlmu bangkit / Bangkit mikat rèh mangukut*, I.12.). This, I would suggest, is consistent with how Mangkunagara IV opens his *Serat Wedhatama* by announcing that he is happy to *train* children (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 163) (*akarena karenan mardi sivi*, I.1).

Mangkunagara IV actually stipulates how this *ngèlmu* is acquired:

"This knowledge  
is achieved through practice,  
the process is with "kas."  
The meaning of "kas" is to strengthen  
one's perseverance in suppressing evil passions."  
(ibid.: 173)

The famous phrase "*ngèlmu iku / kalakoné kanthi laku*" (III.1) receives a different translation from Atmosaputro and Hatch on the one hand and Robson and Zoetmulder on the other. While the first translate the phrase as "This knowledge is achieved through practice", Robson translates this sentence as "knowledge goes together with practice" (1990: 35). Zoetmulder delivers a similar translation: "This wisdom of life is only meaningful when it is put into practice" (1941: 191)<sup>96</sup>. In both Zoetmulder's and Robson's interpretation one has to put the acquired knowledge into practice. One puts it into practice by means of discipline, which in turn means overcoming selfish desires and cultivating peace of mind (Robson 1990: 15-16). In a way, Zoetmulder and Robson turn what I have been arguing so far upside-down. However if, as I have proposed, Mangkunagara IV is divulging practical knowledge, then it would seem

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<sup>96</sup> My translation of: "De levenswijsheid (de ngèlmoe) heeft slechts zin, wanneer ze in praktijk gebracht wordt."

more appropriate that he advises a certain praxis through which one obtains this true knowledge. The praxis in question is that of asceticism and meditation (sharpening one's mind), thereby subduing one's passions so as to see clearly the core of one's being (cf. II.16).

### 8.3.6. *Ngelmu*: practical knowledge vs. theoretical knowledge

It is not within the scope of this dissertation to provide a theory on practical knowledge -or on knowledge in general for that matter. My goal here is much more modest: generating a partial alternative description of *agama*, *slametan*, and *ngelmu* on the basis of Javanese reflections on these phenomena. For this, I have been using Balagangadhara's hypothesis on cultures as learning configurations as a heuristic. That is, in these Javanese reflections I have been looking for possible instances of practical knowledge. With regard to the current topic of *ngelmu* it is useful to consider the generally accepted distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge. While the former can be, and usually is, conveyed verbally (oral or written) and is understood as such, the latter needs praxis, i.e. practice or experience, to become knowledge. In this case understanding is of an experiential nature. And, while in the first case the result is abstract knowledge, in the second one I would rather speak of a skill. I propose, then, that the knowledge discussed in *Serat Wedhatama* is a kind of practical knowledge. It is a praxis, i.e. something that must be done and experienced for it to be understood. Only through doing and practising, can one achieve this knowledge. The example of Senapati thus functions as a signpost indicating the direction to follow, while Mangkunagara IV's explanations are like a roadmap for the course that lays ahead. The exposition in the fourth Canto of *Serat Wedhatama* deals with the four kinds of worship that are portrayed as beacons on the avenue to reach 'true knowledge'.

In the translation by Atmosaputro and Hatch *ngelmu* is consistently depicted as practical knowledge, and consequently the objective of Mangkunagara IV is to train, rather than to teach (in the sense of lecture), his pupils. This is why he urges them to follow the example of Senapati: one has to diligently practice equanimity and patience, so as to become compassionate and forgiving (e.g. Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 173;

III.2-4). This focus on praxis is almost completely absent in both Robson's and Zoetmulder's translation. Praxis is merely the next step after having understood the abstract knowledge Mangkunagara is seemingly divulging (almost *ex cathedra*). In order to get my point across better, compare the different translations of:

*Basa ngèlmu*  
*Mupakaté lan panemu*  
*Pasabé lan tapa*  
 (III.10-11)

In Robson's translation this becomes:

"But as for knowledge,  
 Its acceptance is achieved by considered judgement,  
 And is made effective through asceticism.  
 (Robson 1990: 37)

Zoetmulder renders it as follows:

"As far as the *ngelmu* is concerned:  
 one agrees with her by thinking her over;  
 her efficacy she receives from the practice of asceticism"  
 (Zoetmulder 1941: 193)<sup>97</sup>

In Atmosaputro and Hatch's translation this is:

"Knowledge  
 is thought  
 embued [sic] with asceticism"  
 (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 175)

Since I am not a philologist (let alone versed in Javanese) I will leave the discussion of correct translations to the specialists. I can only point out that in these particular verses two Western philologists understand *ngelmu* as a piece of theoretical or abstract knowledge. Only after accepting this knowledge does one put it into practice. I will leave open to what degree this makes sense. However, the Javanese person renders *ngelmu* explicitly as practical knowledge. After all, asceticism is something one practices or

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<sup>97</sup> My translation of: "Wat de leer van de *ngèlmoe* betreft: men stemt er mee in door haar te overdenken; haar uitwerking echter heeft ze door het beoefenen van ascese."

does. In this interpretation, the highest *ngelmu* is itself an activity, viz. that of thinking imbued with asceticism. The workings of this “thought imbued with asceticism” are actually explained in Canto III. The passions are located in the body and, when let loose, cause great disturbances. The person who is calm, because he is “practicing the highest form of patience” (ibid.: 173) (*Sarwa sarèh saking mardhi martotama*, III.3), is not confused, but forgiving and loving. It is appropriate for a *priyayi* to imitate and follow all the instructions of such a person. The knights (*satriya*) of Java (in this context that is the ancestors of Mangkunagara IV and the example for the *priyayi*) practiced diligently three matters: remaining calm and not becoming regretful when losing something; readily accepting it, when being hurt by fellow-men; being open-hearted and humble, surrendered to God (*Bathara*, not Allah) (ibid.: 175).

### 8.3.7. Islam as practical knowledge?

As pointed out, the Javanese way is set in contradistinction to the way of Islam. However, Mangkunagara’s critique targets the practice of Islam by certain youngsters and not Islam’s doctrines. His problem is with the many young men that boast about their interpretations of the Koran (ibid.: 173) or their theological knowledge (Robson 1990: 37). They hurry to appear as wise men, but they are deceitful. Their reasoning is obscure. They reject their Javanese-ness and try for the knowledge of Mecca (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 173) (*Elok jawané dèn-mohi / Paksa langkah ngangkah mèt kawruh ing Mekah*, III.7). However, they do not know that the *rasa* (the core of the true feeling) they search for is stuck in the body. They are not really striving. Otherwise, they would see that there is no difference between here and there. These young fellows will not be able to attain the desired position in life, as they remain filled with passions. Summarising, in the eyes of Mangkunagara IV, the main difference between the Javanese knights of the old days and the (Muslim) youth<sup>98</sup> of today seems to be that while the former worked diligently at mastering their passions, the latter let those passions roam freely. The difference then is a difference in praxis, and not in doctrines.

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<sup>98</sup> “Youth” here does not just mean Muslim youth, but more importantly refers to a youthfulness of mind, as in naïve and inexperienced. I thank prof. Wieringa for pointing this out.

The discussion of the four different kinds of worship (*sembah*) in Canto IV further substantiates my suggestion that Mangkunagara IV regards *ngelmu* as a kind of practical knowledge and that he treats Islam as analogous to it.

The first worship, that of the body (*raga*), is a ritual cleansing (*susuciné*) done with water, five times a day. Mangkunagara IV is referring here to the five daily ablutions of Islam, as he uses the terms *saréngat* to designate them. Robson in fact translates *susuciné* as ablutions (Robson 1990: 41), while Atmosaputro and Hatch prefer ritual cleansing (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 175), and Zoetmulder opts for cleansing (*reimiging*) (Zoetmulder 1941: 194). However, it is clear that Mangkunagara IV has a very specific understanding of these five daily ablutions. He regards them as only relevant for the apprentice: it is “the conduct of the noviciate” (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 175) (*Pakartiné wong amagang laku*, IV.2). *Saréngat*, Mangkunagara IV tells his pupils, can be a kind of practice (*laku*) if it is done regularly and diligently. The benefits of this practice are a refreshed and perfect body, and a calm, focused mind. Although it can be a practice (*laku*), it must be kept apart from spiritual practice (*laku batin*). After all, only through a higher form of worship (such as *laku batin*) is it possible to see God. While in the old days, things were correct and orderly from generation to generation and *saréngat* was not mixed with spiritual practice (*laku batin*), today this has become confused. Mangkunagara IV points at the zealous Muslims who use the *saréngat* to show off their brilliance and imagine to know the light of God. However, seeing God only is possible with higher forms of worship. Clearly then, *saréngat* is but one form of one of the four worships, which are described as cleansing. Its relevance is purely as a practice and very limited indeed.

The second worship, that of the mind or thought (*cipta*)<sup>99</sup>, also becomes a practice (*laku*) if performed regularly. This practice is the possession of the king. The result is exact and accurate knowledge of providence (Zoetmulder 1941: 195; Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 177; Robson 1990: 43). The cleansing is not with water, but consists in steadily lessen-

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<sup>99</sup> Robson and Zoetmulder translate this worship as respectively “worship of thought” (*cipta*) (Robson 1990: 39) and then as “worship of the heart” (*sembah kalbu*) (Robson 1990: 43; Zoetmulder 1941: 195). Atmosaputro and Hatch use “worship of the mind” in both cases.



ing the mind's desires. One starts this worship orderly, accurate and careful and perseveres steadfastly. The result is the experience of the opening of a greater world. After this experience one's acts are full of calmness, achieved by stillness, clarity, and watchfulness. Then one finds the justice of the All-Wise. Mangkunagara IV, however, admonishes his pupils not to give the will free reign. One must always be attentive to such matters which may cause this practice to fail.

The third worship, that of the soul or the spirit (*jīwa*), is a worship that is truly presented to the Great Invisible (God). It is the essence of practice (*laku*), the behaviour in the area of spiritual matters (*bangsaning batin*). The ritual cleansing is with watchfulness and attentiveness to eternity.

The fourth worship, is that of the essence (*rasa*), in which the core of being is felt. It is achieved by inner firmness. The higher power is only to be achieved if one is “*melok*”. With each consecutive stage of worship, Mangkunagara IV's explanations become more and more unintelligible. That is to say, they become unintelligible for the inexperienced. The fourth worship is an indisputable instance of this, as it is pointed out that one will understand what *melok* is only when all vacillation in the mind or heart (*kalbu*) has vanished.

Thus, Mangkunagara IV approaches Islam as a practical knowledge. Both his critique and his appreciation of Islam are in practical terms. This is evident from the way he explains how the five daily ablutions could be an instance of ‘practice’ (*laku*), but have to remain separate from spiritual practice (*laku batin*). This approach seems, at face value, similar to the way Javanese villagers treated the Lord's Supper.

#### 8.4. Summary: *Ngelmu* as practical knowledge

In the previous paragraphs, I have argued that the *ngelmu* discussed in the *Serat Wedhatama* is a kind of practical knowledge. This seems to correspond with the way Javanese treat *ngelmu* as portrayed in the missionary reports. Despite the missionaries' understanding of it as Javanese religious beliefs, *ngelmu* also appears as a kind of practical knowledge. After all, *ngelmu* is something that needs to be performed, i.e. done, in order to obtain a certain goal or avoid a kind of mishap. As we have seen, there

are many kinds of *ngelmu*. There are those oriented at everyday problems such as resolving health issues, protection against theft, ensuring a speedy voyage. There are more spectacular *ngelmu*: for freeing oneself from ropes or chains, for preventing a gun or pistol from firing, or to block another *ngelmu* (Poensen 1864: 253-58). Then there are *ngelmu* of a more spiritual kind: those that promise wisdom and happiness. These come in different forms such as a formula or a riddle. For example: “What is better: to fear Allah or to dare to stand up to him?” or “Who is the father of Allah?” (Harthoorn 1860: 216; my translation). However, all *ngelmu* share at least two characteristics. Firstly, they are very practical and usually promise an observable result in this life. The reasoning behind a *ngelmu* seems to be: If you do this, then the result will be that. Secondly, it is the actual act of performing the *ngelmu* that makes it effective and not the belief in it. Therefore it is not surprising to find that to the Javanese the meaning of a *ngelmu* (or rather its *rapal*) is unimportant, and there is no need to explain it:

“... the Javanese whom I submitted the *rapal* of this *ngelmu* to, as well as the person from whom I had learned it, could not tell me what it meant. They could of course explain the pure Javanese words that it featured one by one, but neither could they explain the overall meaning nor the Arabic words. *However it does not matter to the Javanese. For him it is only required to know the words by heart. He firmly believes that the ngelmu will demonstrate its power, if he can just pronounce the words of the rapal.*” (Poensen 1864: 247-48; italics mine)<sup>100</sup>

Although the Javanese in question believed in the effectiveness of a *ngelmu*, (religious) belief is not the prerequisite for its effectiveness. Clearly then, the ritual performance of a *ngelmu* is of a different order than the ritual of e.g. the Eucharist where believing that Jesus died for our sins is a necessary requisite for obtaining its benefits. Moreover, understanding the meaning of *ngelmu* seems to be utterly alien to the way the Javanese conceptualised it. Still, and this is telling, someone like

<sup>100</sup> My translation of: “... de Javanen, welken ik de rapal van deze Ngelmoe heb voorgelegd, zoowel als de persoon, van welken ik haar geleerd heb, konden mij niet zeggen, wat zij betekende. De zuiver Javaansche woorden, die er in voorkomen, konden zij natuurlijk wel op zich verklaren, maar den algemeenen zin, zoowel als de arabische worden, niet. Trouwens dit doet er voor den Javaan ook niets toe. Bij hem is het maar vereischte, de woorden uit het hoofd te kennen. Wis en zeker gelooft hij, dat de Ngelmoe hare kracht zal betoonen, als hij de woorden van de rapal maar kan uitspreken.”

Harthoorn defines *ngelmu* as a false belief or false knowledge: the Javanese falsely believe they will obtain holiness through this kind of knowledge. As we saw, Harthoorn even claims that *ngelmu* is to the Javanese what the Gospel is to the Christians. Therefore, the missionaries conceived of *ngelmu* as symmetrical to Christian beliefs. However, the discussion of Mangkunagara IV's reflections on *ngelmu* has given us some concrete indications that there actually is no such symmetry: *ngelmu*, in the Javanese understanding of it, are instances of practical knowledge, not beliefs, doctrines or theories.

#### 8.5. *Agama*: fragments of an alternative description

I will now return to the five expectations we deduced from the Javanese conceptualisation of *agama* as tradition in the previous chapter. Where possible, I will add observations regarding *slametan* and *ngelmu* as well. However, I need to repeat at the outset, that I am not trying to proffer an explanation of neither *agama*, *slametan* nor *ngelmu*. Nor am I trying to explain the relationship (if such relationships exist) between these three phenomena. Such an enterprise is too large and too ambitious for the confines of one dissertation. The objective then is to offer a partial alternative description of these three phenomena, an alternative to the ones that are featured in today's text book story on Javanese religion and culture. We will need to generate many more of such descriptions, before we can start the task of building an alternative understanding.

Firstly, we have pointed out that a tradition is upheld for tradition's sake. Therefore, in Javanese descriptions of *agama* we would expect them to motivate adherence to it on the basis of them being tradition. We find an example of this in canto II of the *Serat Wedathama* when Mangkunagara IV advises his pupils not to follow the way of the Prophet, but to stick to the Javanese way (II.8-14). He motivates this by calling the latter "... the way of veneration of the traditions of my ancestors..." (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 171). Obviously then, the reason to follow this way of veneration (which I have argued above is a practice and not a doctrine) is that it is a tradition, i.e. a set of practices handed down over generations. Moreover, the knowledge that Mangkunagara IV is divulging, is from the very beginning of the *Serat Wedathama* equated with *agama* (I.1). There-

fore, the reason for upholding an *agama* is that it is a tradition. We have come across identical motivations when we discussed the reasons Javanese proffered for performing the *slametan* ritual: the common answer was that they continue the traditions of their ancestors. In the missionary reports we come across many instances where Javanese insist to stick to the traditions of their ancestors. Islam, or at least some practices of it, are considered a part of that body of traditions. The resilience of the Javanese traditions, even after conversion to Christianity, is very well documented. A telling instance is that of a Javanese Christian in Mojowarno who wants to “*ngatoeri nabi Mokammad*”, i.e. dedicate a meal to the prophet Mohammed (Hoezo 1863: 173). The missionary Hoezo explains that this is not possible, now that he has become a Christian. The man answers that he knows this, but that he would not be at ease, if he would neglect the practice. The missionaries were at great pains to explain their Javanese converts why they should abandon their traditions such as circumcisions and *slametans*. The Javanese attachment to the tradition of their ancestors is listed as one of the main obstacles to conversion (e.g. Brumund and Brumund 1854: 38, 57).

Secondly, the distinguishing trait of *agama* as tradition would be its practice, or the way it is practiced. Furthermore, distinctions between different *agama* would therefore (logically) also be expressed in terms of practice and not in terms of belief. The *Serat Wedhatama*, apparently also an exposé of an *agama*, offers no doctrines nor exegesis. It deals entirely with behaviour and practice. Moreover, its criticism of Islam is on the level of its praxis and the behaviour it inculcates. Brumund makes an observation along these lines. The Javanese villagers judge Christianity (or rather the Protestantism Brumund advocates) by its outer appearances: they consider it lacking in ceremony and ritual and therefore think it inferior to Islam, that has 5 daily prayer moments (Brumund and Brumund 1854: 130, 137). It is along the same line that we should understand the Javanese appreciation of Christianity as a *ngelmu* that travelling *kyai* such as Tunggul Wulung came to collect (Hoekema 1997). The Javanese in the missionary accounts seem to appreciate Christianity mainly as a practice. For example, they use its articles of faith to ward off snakes, but do not care for their meaning (Hoezo 1863: 177). Another interesting case is that of a *wedono*, known to be a pious Muslim, who asks one of the missionaries to “pray” for rain, because the “prayers” of the “Mohammedan priests” did not work (Ten Zeldam Ganswijk 1857: 106). Here too, relig-

ion (or at least aspects of it) is seen as a practice that is judged by its results (or absence thereof).

Thirdly, if *agama* is indeed a tradition -i.e. a fixed set of *practices*- then we should expect to see a difference between the way *agama* (as tradition) and religions approach the matter of truth. Religions such as Islam and Christianity, being divine revelations, preach a universal truth. That is to say, being universal, the 'message' these religions spread cuts across borders of time and race. After all, it deals with all creation, its origin and destiny and the place and role of mankind in it. Being a true, universal 'message' implies that other, different 'messages' cannot but be false. A case in point is how for a very long time Christians regarded Mohammed as an impostor. After all, how could he be a Prophet, if Jesus Christ was the Messiah and God's covenant with mankind had thus already been fulfilled? Similarly, their zeal to identify the Javanese religion made the Protestant missionaries look upon the Javanese traditions as false beliefs. However, the *Serat Wedhatama*, in its capacity of a mouthpiece of Javanese *agama*, nowhere makes the claim of being the truth. It does present itself as a path to the truth. Moreover, it presents itself explicitly as but one avenue amongst many. The way of the scholars of Islam is presented as the way of the *kaum*, which is distinct from the way of the Javanese nobility (e.g. II. 13-14). After all, Mangkunagara IV explains: "seeing that men are not all alike (...) there is no similarity between the paths that are embarked upon." (Robson 1990: 43; cf. Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 177; III.9). Different *agama* are thus different ways to reach the truth. Therefore, they are not competitors for the truth. We often come across this same sentiment in the accounts of missionaries. Harthoorn meets the *bekel* (local tax collector) of Lawung who is of the opinion that Christianity and Islam are actually very much the same and that, although at times they seem to be diverging, in the end they lead to the same destination. Harthoorn adds that he comes across this conviction often. (Harthoorn 1858: 155-56). Ten Zeldam Ganswijk, a fellow missionary, notes a complete indifference on behalf of a *santri* he meets in Malang regarding the content of their respective faiths. He readily admits to every tenet that undermines Islam. He experiences the same in a discussion with the *wedono* (Javanese civil servant) of Sidokari (Ten Zeldam Ganswijk 1858: 122-23). This too is not an isolated case. The instances where an actual 'theological discussion' does take place, it takes the form of a battle of wit or *kerata basa*. Such cases, as I have argued

above, cannot readily be taken for discussions on the content of faith, doctrine, belief, etc. Similar to the reluctance to discuss the religious motivations for holding a *slametan*, it is perhaps tempting to attribute such responses to prudence -especially in the face of representatives of colonial power. Still, the way the Javanese respond to such religious challenges is telling. On the one hand, the actual beliefs, and the difference between them, is treated with indifference. On the other hand, the difference between religions is depicted as a mere difference in avenue. Minimally, then, even if these responses are a display of prudence, the way in which *agama* is approached dovetails with the way it is done in *Serat Wedhatama*.

Fourthly, as traditions are fixed sets of practices handed down from generation to generation, they become tied specifically to a certain social group. We have seen that this is indeed the case in the *Serat Wedhatama*. The discussed *agama* belongs to the king of Java, and by extension to the Javanese nobility. It is thus a different *agama* from that of another social group, e.g. that of the *kaum*. In the missionary accounts too we find that the Javanese regard an *agama* as something that is tied to a social group. Harthoorn for example, is witness to a discussion between the missionary Jellesma and a Javanese man. The latter, at one point, declares that each people has its own God and its own religion -implying that conversion to Christianity would be inappropriate for him (Harthoorn 1858: 144-45). Moreover, many Javanese identify being Christian to being Dutch. The missionary Smeding learns that a Javanese pastor sold his *gamelan* upon his conversion. He deemed it inappropriate for a Christian to play the Javanese *gamelan*. However, it would be fitting for him to play the Dutch *gamelan*. Smeding has to explain to him that his conversion doesn't imply he should drop all things Javanese (Smeding 1861: 258-59). In a similar vein, it is often noted that many Javanese Christians run the risk of mimicking the Dutch, in dress and behaviour (Ten Zeldam Ganswijk 1857: 108). Brumund relates how a Javanese Christian, who is a potter by trade, has to explain to other Javanese that becoming a Christian does not imply taking up the professions of the Dutch, such as working in an office. This turns out to be hard to understand for the Javanese (Brumund and Brumund 1854: 57). Similarly, some Javanese seem to have rejected Islam on the ground of it being a religion only appropriate for Arabs and not for Javanese (See e.g. Ricklefs 2007: 183-89; Drewes 1966: 335).

Summarising then, the above paragraphs are intended as a partial alternative description of *agama* in the Javanese sense of the word. It should not be seen as my stance on what *agama* in Java is or was, but rather as a first indication of the extent in which *agama* as tradition is different from *agama* as religion. If one thing has become clear, then minimally that Javanese *agama* is not symmetrical to religion. I propose that it actually makes sense to speak of *agama* as a tradition. Doing so puts existing anecdotes and source material on Javanese religion in a different perspective. In the case of the *Serat Wedhatama* it even offers a new consistency.

#### 8.6. Conclusion

The objective of the last two chapters was to add substance to the claim that syncretist 'Javanese Islam' is an experiential entity. I made this claim on the basis of two arguments. Firstly, I have argued that the conceptual genealogy shows that there is no empirical nor theoretical evidence for the existence of this 'Javanese Islam'. Secondly, I have argued that the constraints working on the Western experience of Java are Christian theological in nature: Western culture seems compelled to recognise religions in other cultures, even where they are actually absent. In other words, Western culture describes other cultures as pale variants of itself and in those descriptions religion is one of the main benchmarks. In the course of this dissertation I have referred to this as the assumption of the universality of religion.

Exposing 'Javanese Islam' as an experiential entity implies that there is no such thing in Javanese reality. The question then becomes, if it was not a Javanese religion these generations of Westerners were describing, then what do we make of such phenomena as *ngelmu* and *slametan*? After all, their existence can hardly be denied. The possibility of offering an alternative description of these phenomena should make my claim that 'Javanese Islam' is an experiential entity more acceptable.

The hypothesis that cultures are configurations of learning allows us to conceive of cultural differences in a different way. That is, cultures differ from each other in different ways. It might allow us to conceive of Javanese culture without taking recourse to a Javanese religion. I have tried to

make this suggestion more tangible by offering partial alternative descriptions of three core concepts in the construction that is 'Javanese Islam': *agama*, *slametan*, and *ngelmu*. In this endeavour I have taken 'practical knowledge' as a heuristic. As much as possible, I have looked for a Javanese voice on these three phenomena. The sources available to me are the same sources used in the standard textbook story on 'Javanese Islam'. Based on these partial re-descriptions, I would like to present the following three observations.

Firstly, it seems possible to talk about *slametan* as pure practice, about *ngelmu* as practical knowledge, and about *agama* as tradition in a consistent way. That is to say, the scarce 'Javanese descriptions' we have, seem to indicate that such conceptualisations make sense. However, much (too much) remains opaque and in the absence of a theory on practical knowledge or tradition, we cannot and should not regard these alternative descriptions as actual explanations of these phenomena. Still, minimally, these descriptions indicate the possibility of an truly alternative understanding of *agama*, *ngelmu*, and *slametan*.

Secondly, the discussed alternative partial descriptions have done away with the symmetry between religions such as Christianity and Islam one the hand and 'Javanese Islam' on the other. Moreover, the posited relationship between *slametan* and Javanese religion -the first being the expression of the world view contained in the latter- and between *ngelmu* and Javanese religion -the first being the beliefs and doctrines of the latter- have now dissolved as well. Consequently, the relationship, assuming there is any, between *agama*, *ngelmu*, and *slametan* needs to be researched from scratch. In fact, we can now start to appreciate what it could mean for the Javanese culture to be *different* from the Western culture. *Agama*, *ngelmu* and *slametan* become phenomena that seem to have no counterpart in Western culture. The hypothesis of cultures as learning configurations may help to further guide an inquiry into the nature of them.

Thirdly, the last two chapters have added substance to the claim that 'Javanese Islam' is an experiential entity. They have done so in two regards. On the one hand, they indicate in what respect certain data that do not fit the structure of the experiential entity 'Javanese Islam' get filtered out over generations. A case in point is how in anthropological literature Javanese reflections on *slametan*, indications of an absence of re-



ligious motivation, are filtered out. Another is how over time *ngelmu* is increasingly represented as an instance of magical belief or of mystical doctrine. In the old missionary accounts, however, we have found many indications that to the Javanese themselves *ngelmu* is nothing more than practical knowledge. The latter connotation has become completely ignored and lost today.

Summarising, if 'Javanese Islam' is an experiential entity and if *agama* is tradition -and I have presented many arguments that indicate this is the case- then a whole new field of research is opening up within the domain of Javanese Studies.



## 9. Conclusion

At this point I would like to recapitulate the main argument of this dissertation, the sub-arguments implied, the consequences of this argument, and the new avenues for research that have opened up as a result.

Perhaps though it would be wise to start off with pointing out the things I have not argued. Firstly, I would like to make very clear that I have not argued that there is no Islam in Java. Neither have I argued that Javanese Islam is not really Islam. Any reading of my dissertation in these terms is false. In fact, my dissertation is neither about Islam, nor about Javanese Islam, or even about Javanism. Rather, it is about the study of Javanese culture that makes use of these concepts, and consequently tries to make sense of Javanese traditions in these terms. Secondly, I have not made any claims about the Javanese, except that it is highly unlikely that the entire Javanese population is incapable of logical reasoning. Thirdly, I have not presented an alternative understanding of *agama*, *slametan* and *ngelmu*. I have merely provided partial descriptions of these phenomena, which I argue are consistent with the data that is available to us. We need many more of such descriptions before we can begin to form a truly alternative understanding of Javanese traditions. Fourthly, I have not argued that *agama* as *adat* is the counterpart for *agama* as religion. In other words, the structure of the representation of Javanese Islam -where *slametan* is its central ritual and *ngelmu* are its doctrines- is not replicated, nor presupposed in *agama* as *adat*.

This dissertation does deal with the theoretical problems involved with the scholarly understanding of certain aspects of Javanese cultural reality. It thus implies a critique on Javanese Studies to the extent that the concept of a syncretist Javanese religion is constitutive for this scholarly discipline.

### **Javanese Islam and Javanism as pieces of Christian theology**

I have started my analysis with the observation that the understanding of 'Javanese Islam' as a syncretist religion that combines religious beliefs and practices from Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Animism and ancestor worship leads us into a logical inconsistency. I will not repeat my entire argument here, but it is necessary to stress that even if one considers Javanese cultural reality to be inconsistent, then still we cannot accept an explanation in terms of syncretism. After all, calling such practices and beliefs syncretist does not explain anything: syncretism is nothing more than a label for such practices. In terms of explanation it is simply not sufficient. If, however, one would consider it difficult to accept the idea that Javanese religious traditions are inconsistent, that the Javanese display inconsistent religious behaviour or hold inconsistent religious beliefs, then the concept of a syncretist Javanese Islam cannot but be a misrepresentation. Consequently, both instances justify the examination of the representation of the Javanese religious condition in terms of syncretism.

The point of departure for my investigation is the question of the origin of the notion of syncretist 'Javanese Islam'. The result is a genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' which allows us to make several observations. The first observation is that this genealogy is formed by several generations of representations, each building upon the former. The second observation is how each successive stage of descriptions stays within certain limits and does not exceed the terms of descriptions as laid out from the very beginning. In other words, there is a certain structure to these descriptions. The third observation is that this lineage of descriptions is part of a larger Western project of coming to terms with Javanese cultural and social reality. Thus, 'Javanese Islam' is a Western concept with which Western observers have tried to make sense of the Javanese religious condition. This means on the one hand, that the concept never was a Javanese term of self-description; at least not until Javanese scholars became acquainted with it through the existing scholarly discourse. Obviously then, their contribution is to a Western discourse, a discourse that has demonstrable Western roots. On the other hand it means that the concept of 'Javanese Islam' in itself owes little to nothing to non-Western sources. Such sources, e.g. Arab or Chinese ones, have only been used to corroborate or refute certain elements in, or furnish certain de-

tails to the existing dominant Western discourse. There is, to my knowledge, no conceptual counterpart for syncretist Javanese Islam to be found in these sources. In summary, the genealogy shows how the concept of a syncretist Javanese Islam gradually crystallised and how it, together with its counterpart Javanism, had been completely developed as early as the 1860s. Both concepts have remained unchanged ever since and thus, for the purpose of this dissertation, there is no need to further extend the genealogy.

The genealogy does not only trace the historical development of the descriptions of religion in Java. It also describes the conceptual context within which it made sense to speak of syncretist Javanese Islam. Following Balagangadhara, I have characterised this conceptual context or framework as essentially Christian theological. I have done so on three grounds. Firstly, I have pointed out that there is a great continuity in terms of the structuring concepts and the conceptual framework from the period of the very first descriptions of Javanese religion to now. In other words, this continuity stretches from the pre-Enlightenment period, when Western knowledge of the world was constrained by what could be gathered from the Bible, to the post-Enlightenment period, when knowledge about the world is deemed to be scientific or at least secular. This continuity is expressed in the kind of questions that appear to make sense to Western observers and what is considered a valid answer to such questions. Secondly, I have drawn attention to a key assumption in the description of religion in Java, viz. the universality of religion. This assumption entails the conviction that each culture has its own indigenous religion. I have discussed, again following Balagangadhara, how this in origin theological tenet has become a scientific trivium by means of a process of secularisation. Relevant to the topic of my dissertation is the simple observation that in all the descriptions of Javanese religion the question never was whether the Javanese had religion but always what the religion of the Javanese was. The genealogy of Javanese Islam can thus be interpreted as an attempt, spanning several centuries, to answer that question. This illustrates the kind of constraints working upon both the experiences and epistemological efforts of generations of Western observers. Thirdly, closely tied to the assumption of the universality of religion is the idea of a civilisational evolution, with different stages through which all of mankind needs to pass. Since each nation or culture was thought to have its own religion, and since measured to

Christianity other religions could not but be false religions, the religions of the world became ranked according to their rationality. At the pinnacle of this classification was Christianity -evidencing abstract mental capabilities- while the lower rungs were occupied by animist and polytheist religions -displaying less evolved, because more concrete, thought. Javanese religion, either called Javanese Islam or Javanism, was considered syncretist because it supposedly mixed up and confused the doctrines from different religions, some of which were actually mutually exclusive. This representation of the Javanese religious condition in terms of syncretism was not considered problematic at all. After all the Javanese were simply viewed as less evolved, and thus prone to committing logical inconsistencies. Only within such a conceptual framework does it make sense to speak of syncretist Javanese Islam. This framework, I argue, is both essentially and thoroughly theological. It is in this sense that we should consider the concept of syncretist Javanese Islam as a piece of Christian, Protestant, theology.

The concept has of course become secularised over time, meaning that the explicitly theological framework has reclined to the background. On the one hand this explains why a concept such as syncretist Javanese Islam might still seem intuitively meaningful. This is due both to the long currency of the concept and to the fact that Western culture has been profoundly shaped by Christianity. We could say that the theological framework is still lingering in the background. On the other hand, if we are no longer willing to condone certain theological tenets such as the universality of religion and the concomitant idea of a hierarchical ranking of religions, the concept of syncretist Javanese Islam leads one into logical problems -as argued before.

Furthermore, I have also used the genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' to demonstrate how this concept became structured. As I have argued, the description of Javanese Islam hinges on two concepts: belief and practice. Moreover, the practices that have come to be taken for Javanese religious practices are regarded as an expression of the religious beliefs of the Javanese. I have illustrated this with an analysis of scholarly representations of the Javanese *slametan*. Although this ritual has been described by different scholars in different ways -as Islamic, animist or syncretist- it has always been described according to the beliefs that are thought to underlie it. A second example I have discussed is that of *ngelmu*. Here

too, I argue, Javanese practices became represented in terms of beliefs. In fact, retracing the different *ngelmu* to their different religious roots (Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic) was one way of establishing that Javanese religion is a syncretist religion, i.e. a religion harbouring mutually exclusive religious beliefs. The way 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' were conceptually structured, i.e. centred on religious beliefs and taking certain practices for expressions of religious beliefs, is also indicative of the kind of constraints that have been working on their conceptualisation: Javanese religion has been conceived of as parallel to Christianity. Firstly, the *slametan* has become represented in analogy to the Christian ritual of the Eucharist of Lord's supper. It is considered the central ritual of Javanese religious life and it is thought to be the expression of the religious beliefs of the Javanese. Secondly, *ngelmu* initially were conceived of as the religious doctrines of the Javanese. As we saw someone like Harthoorn even went as far as calling Javanese *ngelmu* the Gospel of the Javanese.

Summarising, with the genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' I have argued that the process by which the West has tried to make sense of the Javanese religious condition was constrained by Christian theology. Not only the question as to the religion of the Javanese but also the answer, a Javanese Islam or Javanism in analogy to Christianity, are essentially theological, i.e. they can be traced back to theological tenets.

### **The post-colonial explanation - the explanatory force of the argument**

I am hardly the first to consider syncretist 'Javanese Islam' or 'Javanism' a misrepresentation. Numerous scholars, especially from the period after Indonesia's independence, have singled out this concept in their critique of colonial scholarship as well. In particular the connotation of the Javanese being less than truly Islamic, or merely nominal Muslims received staunch criticism. And rightfully so. I have discussed such criticisms under the heading of post-colonial critique, as they localise the source of the misrepresentation in colonial hegemony. That is, they take the representation of the Javanese as nominal Muslims, and the religion of the Javanese as not truly Islamic, to be a wilful imagination on the part of colonial scholarship and government. The representation of the Javanese as tolerant, harmonious, in essence still animist and only out-

wardly Muslim, is said to be pitted against the rebellious, political Islam that threatened the colonial status quo. In other words, because Dutch colonial government feared Islam in Java as a political force, it stimulated the representation of the Javanese as nominal Muslims. I have pointed out several shortcomings in this type of argumentation. One thing is that it is not clear how this misrepresentation effectively furthered colonial interests. Why did colonial administration and scholarship choose this particular misrepresentation? Any answer to this question (such as driving a wedge between the world of the *keraton* and their peasantry on the one hand and that of the *pesantren* on the other) turns out to be *ad hoc* and thus has little to no explanatory power. As I have argued, the first critique of the concept of syncretist, i.e. nominal, Javanese Islam was executed by Snouck Hurgronje, the Netherlands' foremost orientalist scholar. The alternative he put forward, i.e. the Javanese are actually true Muslims, explicitly served the purpose of colonial dominance. Therefore, there is no necessary connection between colonial hegemony and the misrepresentation of the Javanese religious condition in terms of syncretist Javanese Islam. Hence, by referring to the presence of a colonial power structure we cannot explain why the misrepresentation that is syncretist Javanese Islam took the form it has taken.

The argument presented in this dissertation, however, does offer a necessary explanation, as it shows why the Javanese religious condition became represented as a syncretist religion, and not as something else. As I have discussed extensively, the concept of a syncretist Javanese religion as it is used in the contemporary scholarly discourse is the product of a Western endeavour to come to terms with Javanese reality. Thus, as reiterated above, 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' are the result of a culture-specific way, *in casu* of Western culture, of making sense of Javanese cultural reality. Western culture has been deeply and profoundly shaped by Christianity. Although there are many ways to argue for this point, for the purpose of this dissertation, it suffices to draw attention to the presence of certain epistemological constraints. As examined above, both the question as to the religion of the Javanese as well as what could count as an answer are in origin theological. However, after the Enlightenment when the explicit theological framework retracted into the background, both question and answer maintained their apparent appropriateness. I have referred to this as an instance of secularisation. The presence of such constraints explains why 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' have been



conceptualised the way they have. That is, once we identified these twin concepts as pieces of Christian theology, it also became obvious why they are structured the way they are.

### **A representation of what?**

At this point the following question arises: if syncretist 'Javanese Islam' (or 'Javanism') is a misrepresentation, of what is it a misrepresentation? On this matter the argument presented in my dissertation diverges from the post-colonial one as well. The latter has it that syncretist Javanese Islam is a misrepresentation of nothing more or less than Islam in Java. That is, this Islam has assimilated certain elements from Java's pre-Islamic belief systems and culture. The end-result, local Islam if you will, is said to be simply the way Islam is practised in Java. This reasoning falls short on two main points. Firstly, the argument is not conclusive, because what in the eyes of one Muslim is an acceptable Islamic practice, might not be acceptable in those of another Muslim (Javanese or other). In other words, the assimilation of such non-Islamic elements is contested within the Islamic community itself. Secondly, 'local Islam' does not depict the same phenomenon as syncretist Javanese Islam. Since the said assimilation entails bringing certain practices in line with Islamic teachings, it is implied that there is a moment when those practices are in conflict with Islamic teachings. Upholding religious practices and beliefs that are mutually exclusive is what is called syncretism. Therefore, syncretist Javanese Islam and assimilated Javanese Islam (i.e. local Islam) refer to two different phenomena. Consequently, the alternative presented by the post-colonial argument is not a true alternative explanation, as it leaves the initial misrepresentation untouched.

I have proposed that syncretist Javanese Islam or Javanism is in fact an experiential entity -another suggestion borrowed from Balagangadhara. This implies that syncretist Javanese Islam is an entity in the experiential world of those who have described it, viz. Western observers, rather than an entity in Javanese reality. Thus conceived, the genealogy of Javanese Islam actually shows the crystallisation of this experiential entity or *Gestalt*. The structures of it were laid out from the very first descriptions onwards and were enriched with detail from generation to generation. I have described this process in terms of a loop between the actual experi-

ences and the descriptions of these experiences. The latter offered the possibility of reflecting on these experiences, and thus of infusing them with structure. Consequently, new experiences were more easily identified and structured. The result, syncretist Javanese Islam, allowed Westerners in Java to come to terms with certain aspects of Javanese cultural reality.

There are two reasons to consider this proposal. Firstly, there is indeed an absence of theoretical and empirical proof for the existence of Javanese religion. In fact, the genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' gives strong indications in that direction. The lack of theoretical proof is illustrated by the fact that 'proving' the existence of syncretist Javanese Islam or Javanism needs to either explicitly condone theology or assume the universality of religion. The lack of empirical evidence is illustrated by how certain phenomena are taken to be constitutive elements of Javanese religion, while explicit proof for this is absent. Cases in point are *slametan* and *ngelmu*. They have, despite evidence to the contrary, been consistently represented in terms of (underlying) beliefs. The suggestion that syncretist Javanese Islam is an experiential entity allows us to make sense of why and how these phenomena have come to be misrepresented. Secondly, and consequentially, we can now start to conceive of *slametan* and *ngelmu* in a different way.

### **New avenues - the productivity of the argument**

The proposal that syncretist Javanese Islam or Javanism is an experiential entity does not mean that the Western observers were merely hallucinating. Actually, I have suggested that this experiential entity is constructed from different (fragments of) Javanese cultural phenomena. By employing a heuristic drawn from Balagangadhara's hypothesis on cultures, I have attempted partial re-descriptions of *agama*, *slametan* and *ngelmu*. Although the descriptions seem at first sight to paint a consistent image, they do not come close to being an alternative explanation. Firstly, it is unclear what the relationships, if any, between these phenomena are. Secondly, we do not know whether *agama*, *ngelmu* and *slametan* are phenomena that stand on their own, or are mere fragments of larger cultural phenomena. Thirdly, The descriptions so far have been generated by employing a heuristic. For an actual explanation we would need an ap-

propriate hypothesis -for which the suggestion of cultures as configurations of learning is pitched at a level that is far too high and abstract.

Much more work can be done in generating alternative descriptions. Many Javanese literary sources are still to be disclosed and even those that are could be scrutinised anew. Using practical knowledge and tradition as a heuristic could be an interesting possibility. For example, what can the *Serat Centhini* tell us about the slametan? Or how is knowledge conceived of in the *Sasana Sunu*? Another avenue for research could be in what way Javanese culture accommodated Islam. We saw an instance of this in the *Serat Wedhatama* where Islam was regarded as a practice, and the daily ablutions were integrated into an apparently Javanese system of spiritual practice. Moreover, we saw how Mangkunagara IV sets diligent practice of Islam by the *kaum* apart from the *agama* of the *priyayi*. What other *agama* were there in 18th and 19th century Java? On what basis were they distinguished from each other? Are the criteria for distinguishing *agama* from each other the same or different from distinguishing religions from each other? These are the kind of questions that emerge in the wake of the suggestions made in this dissertation.

Adjacent to the previous avenue is this last one I propose here. In the course of my dissertation I have barely considered the opinions and reflections of the Javanese themselves. This is partly due to the fact that the focus of my research has not been on Javanese cultural, social or religious reality itself, but rather on the study of it. However, it is also due to the fact that the accounts that do treat with this reality, hardly present the actual voice of the Javanese as such. Instead they offer interpretations and representations of the answers received to the questions they raised. As we saw, this all too often means that although the questions and answers make sense to the scholars, they do not necessarily make sense (in the same way) to their informants.

Besides the above mentioned avenues of research I would suggest that the argument presented in my dissertation has been epistemologically productive with regard to the existing discourse as well. Firstly, it explains why the discussion about the nature of Javanese Islam -syncretist vs. Islamic- is such a long-spun one. Syncretist Javanese Islam and assimilated Javanese Islam actually refer to two different things. The first refers to an experiential entity, the second to Islam in Java. Obviously,

such a discussion cannot be settled. This then is the first sense in which this proposal is epistemologically productive: it settles a centuries-old discussion by disclosing it as an empty one. Secondly, it shows why the concepts 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' are structured the way they are. As we saw they have been conceived as symmetrical to Christianity, which is the result of the specific constraints that have been working upon the process that brought about these concepts. This is a second indication that the proposal at hand is epistemologically productive: it does a better job at explaining the origin of the misrepresentation that is 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' than for example the post-colonial argument. Thirdly, this suggestion opens up new avenues of research. Much contemporary research on Javanese religion and culture keeps rehashing the same standpoints and arguments from the late 19th century: either one describes Javanese religion as a syncretist reconciliation of different worldviews, or one points out that Islam in Java has assimilated Javanese cultural elements. A dismissal of 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' opens the way for new questions and new hypotheses.

It is then on these grounds -the argument, its explanatory force, and its productivity- that I would like to put forward my dissertation for your consideration.





## 10. Abbreviations

|                |  |
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| <i>B&amp;B</i> | <i>Berichten en brieven, voorgelezen op de maandelijksche bestonden van het Nederlandsche Zending Genootschap.</i> |
| <i>MNZG</i>    | <i>Mededeelingen van wege het Nederlandsche Zendinggenootschap</i>   |
| <i>NZG</i>     | Het Nederlandsche Zendinggenootschap   |





## 11. Glossary

|                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| <i>Abangan</i>            | lit. the red ones or the brown ones, term used to refer to nominal or syncretist Javanese Muslims  |
| <i>Adat</i>               | an arabic loanword, those customs that do not have an explicit Islamic legitimation  |
| <i>Adipati</i>            | colonial term for <i>Bupati</i> , a regent, i.e. government officer in charge of a regency   |
| <i>Agama</i>              | religion   |
| <i>Aliran kebatinan</i>   | mystical sects, mystical movements   |
| <i>Aliran kepercayaan</i> | belief movements, often used interchangeably with <i>aliran kebatinan</i>  |
| <i>Babad</i>              | chronicle  |
| <i>Batara Guru</i>        | male deity, king of the realm of deities, the great teacher, an important wayang character   |
| <i>Bekel</i>              | local tax collector  |
| <i>Bersih desa</i>        | lit. cleaning of the village. Yearly ceremony originally carried out to free the community of evil spirits, disaster, and misfortune. It used to involve offerings to the village guardian spirit, <i>dhangyang desa</i> , and a <i>slametan</i> |
| <i>Bidab</i>              | heresy   |
| <i>Boreh boreh</i>        | a yellow paste made from, amongst other ingredients, curcuma   |
| <i>Desa</i>               | Javanese village   |
| <i>Dewa</i>               | a god, idol  |
| <i>Dewi Sri</i>           | the Javanese, pre-Islamic, pre-Hindu goddess of fertility, Dewi means goddess  |
| <i>Dan-hjang-Desa</i>     | <i>dhanyang desa</i> , village guardian spirit   |

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| <i>Dhiker</i>         | lit. remembrance (of Allah). A type of incantation designed to facilitate an ecstatic experience of unison with Allah. The practice of repeated chanting of sacred formulas which induces the state of trance, which in turn is integral part of various Javanese dances, plays, and songs |
| <i>Donga</i>          | <i>Jan.</i> , Islamic prayer, Ind. <i>doa</i>  |
| <i>Faqih</i>          | expert on Islamic law  |
| <i>Fatimah</i>        | the first chapter of <i>Qur'an</i> and a common prayer in the Muslim world   |
| <i>Fiqh</i>           | Islamic jurisprudence, or the human understanding of the <i>sharia</i> , which is divine law as revealed in the <i>Qur'an</i> and <i>Sunnah</i>  |
| <i>Haji</i>           | the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca  |
| <i>Hajji</i>          | a person who has undertaken the <i>Haji</i>  |
| <i>Guste</i>          | honorary title given to a person of high rank such as a prince or regent   |
| <i>Hadith</i>         | the reports on the teachings, deeds and sayings of Mohammed  |
| <i>Iblis</i>          | Islamic term for devil   |
| <i>Idul Fitri</i>     | an Islamic religious holiday that marks the end of the <i>Ramadan</i> , the month of fasting   |
| <i>Javanicus (-i)</i> | also Javanist, scholar of Javanese language and culture  |
| <i>Jawi</i>           | a <i>hajji</i> from the Malay archipelago. Term used to designate Sumatrans, Javanese and Malay pilgrims   |
| <i>Juru kunci</i>     | gate keeper, lit. keeper of the key  |
| <i>Kalam</i>          | orthodox Islamic doctrine  |
| <i>Kampung</i>        | village, a residential area for lower classes in a town. Also means village or home town   |
| <i>Kanda</i>          | <i>kandha</i> , speak, tell. <i>Serat kandha</i> is short for <i>serat kandhaning ringgit purwa</i> : book of the tales for wayang purwa   |

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| <i>Kawi</i>        | literary language on Java, Bali and Lombok based on Old Javanese. It contains a lot of Sanskrit loanwords. It is used in i.a. <i>wayang kulit</i>   |
| <i>Kaum</i>        | the pious, professional religious community   |
| <i>Kejawen</i>     | all that relates to Javanese customs and beliefs, Javanese mysticism, general Javanese knowledge  |
| <i>Kerata basa</i> | wordplay or association of words. Words are chopped up in different parts which are given separate meanings, so as to achieve an explanation of the original word   |
| <i>Ketib</i>       | <i>khatib</i> , preacher at the mosque, mosque official   |
| <i>Kraton</i>      | Javanese palace   |
| <i>Kris</i>        | Javanese sword or dagger  |
| <i>Khurafat</i>    | myth, superstition  |
| <i>Kyai</i>        | <i>kiai</i> , title of reverence for a venerated scholar or teacher of Islam, and for venerated objects such as <i>kris</i> or certain books.   |
| <i>Labuhan</i>     | annual sacrificial ceremony. There is one dedicated to the spirits of Mount Merapi: a procession from the royal palace on Yogyakarta led by the <i>juru kunci</i> (formerly Mbah Maridjan) who sacrifices to the volcano spirits a set of ritual offerings including textiles, perfume, incense, money and, every eight years, a horse saddle |
| <i>Loerah</i>      | head of a <i>desa</i> , also looks over correct execution of the rituals of the village   |
| <i>Maulud</i>      | Mohammed's birthday, stories about Mohammed's birth   |
| <i>Mataram</i>     | can refer to Mataram sultanate (c. 1570-1755 CE) and to the Mataram kingdom (c. 752-1006 CE), both had their geographic centre in the region south to Mount Merapi  |
| <i>Memorie</i>     | a text discussing certain topics. In VOC administration it was a document providing an overview of a territory and its factory  |

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| <i>Modin</i>      | the person who calls to prayers, <i>muezzin</i> , village religious functionary, especially officiating at circumcisions                                     |
| <i>Murid</i>      | a pupil, a student, a disciple or follower, a <i>tarekat</i> initiate  |
| <i>Ngelmu</i>     | knowledge, often defined as esoteric, mystical or magical knowledge  |
| <i>Panembahan</i> | honorific title of the rulers of Mataram Islam. The first to carry the title was Sultan Panembahan Senapati (r. 1584-1601), founder of the Mataram sultanate |
| <i>Pasisir</i>    | Northern coastal region of Java  |
| <i>Pate</i>       | prob. <i>patih</i> or <i>adipati</i> (see <i>adipati</i> )   |
| <i>Patih</i>      | governor, vice regent, chief minister to a king  |
| <i>Pesantren</i>  | Islamic boarding school  |
| <i>Petungan</i>   | Javanese numerology  |
| <i>Pitrah</i>     | <i>fitrah</i> , the tithe of cash or rice paid at the end of the Ramadan fast to the Muslim functionaries  |
| <i>Prambanan</i>  | a Hindu temple complex in Central Java   |
| <i>Primbon</i>    | prose, with a loose structure, collections of things worth knowing   |
| <i>Pujangga</i>   | man of letters, court poet   |
| <i>Ramadan</i>    | 9th month of the Islamic calendar, fasting month   |
| <i>Rapal</i>      | an incantation in a ritual, usually part of a <i>ngelmu</i>  |
| <i>Resident</i>   | a regional or provincial governor  |
| <i>Ratu adil</i>  | the just king. In Javanese lore it is prophesied that the <i>Ratu Idul</i> will establish universal peace and justice  |
| <i>Shabada</i>    | Islamic confession of faith. The declaration of the belief in the oneness of God ( <i>tawhid</i> ) and acceptance of Muhammed as God's prophet               |
| <i>Sedekah</i>    | a religious meal, an offering to spirits. Often described as identical to the <i>slametan</i> , although the   |

|                 |  |
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|                 | former is usually held to the benefit of the deceased and the latter to the benefit of the living. However, in practice the two terms seem to be used interchangeably                                      |
| <i>Salat</i>    | also <i>solat</i> , ritual prayers and actions performed five times a day. Can also refer to the prayer ritual that celebrates the end of Ramadan  |
| <i>Santri</i>   | a scholar of Islam, an orthodox Muslim   |
| <i>Sati</i>     | widow burning  |
| <i>Sesajen</i>  | also <i>sesaji</i> , ritual offerings  |
| <i>Shirk</i>    | also <i>syirik</i> , the Islamic sin of practising polytheism or idolatry, i.e. worship and deification of any entity other than Allah. It is opposed to <i>tauhid</i>                                     |
| <i>Silsila</i>  | lineage, spiritual genealogy, in Sufism it means the chain of masters for the <i>tarekat</i> taught in in a particular Sufi order (also <i>tarekat</i> ). Usually this chain is traced back to the Prophet |
| <i>Slamet</i>   | harmony, a state in which nothing will happen, a state of well-being, security and freedom of hindrances of both practical and spiritual kind  |
| <i>Slametan</i> | prayer meal, the objective of the <i>slametan</i> is <i>slamet</i>   |
| <i>Suluk</i>    | certain type of song, usually in <i>tembang</i> metre, with a mystical content.  |
| <i>Sunnah</i>   | also <i>sunna</i> , the generally approved standard or practice introduced by the Prophet as well as the pious Muslim of the olden days  |
| <i>Suragama</i> | prob. preacher or clergy. Robson notes that the term is not featured in any dictionary, he speculates that it refers to a specific group of servants, <i>in casu</i> armed clergy                          |
| <i>Susuban</i>  | title of the ruler of Surakarta  |
| <i>Ujub</i>     | opening speech in a <i>slametan</i> , stating its purpose or reason and mentioning the invoked spirits or deities  |

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| <i>Tarekat</i>           | also <i>tariqa</i> , a Sufi order, and the central teaching of that order   |
| <i>Tawhid</i>            | the doctrine of the oneness of God. It is the act of believing and affirming that God is one and unique, i.e. monotheism                  |
| <i>Tembang</i>           | sung or recited Javanese poetry   |
| <i>Tjagal bakal-desa</i> | <i>cakal-bakal desa</i> , (spirit of) the village founder   |
| <i>Tumpeng</i>           | rice cones served at the <i>slametan</i> meal   |
| <i>Wali</i>              | usually refers to the <i>wali sanga</i> , the nine Muslim saints, or pious leaders, who are believed to have spread Islam in Java         |
| <i>Wayang</i>            | traditional drama performance on Java and Bali. The plays are usually based on the Indian epics Mahabharata and Ramayana                  |
| <i>Wayang kulit</i>      | Javanese shadow play, i.e. wayang performed with leather puppets  |
| <i>Wedono</i>            | Javanese civil servant, usually head of a district  |
| <i>Weda</i>              | ghosts  |
| <i>Widadari</i>          | heavenly nymph. <i>Widadari</i> have male counterparts sometimes called <i>widadara</i> .   |
| <i>Zakat</i>             | alms-giving is the practice of charitable giving by Muslims, based on accumulated wealth, and is obligatory for all who are able to do so |







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## 13. Curriculum Vitae

Jochem van den Boogert was born in Ermelo, the Netherlands, on 25 December 1971. He obtained his Master in Philosophy (cum laude) in 1997 and his Master after Master in Cultural Sciences (cum laude) in 1998 at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. From 2001 to 2005 he was Affiliated Researcher at the research centre Vergelijkende Cultuurwetenschap (Ghent University). In 2011 he enrolled as PhD student at LIAS (Leiden University). In the academic year 2014/2015 he was Teaching and Research Assistant (O.O.M.) and since 9/2015 he is lecturer at LIAS.



## 14. Summary

This dissertation does not deal with Javanese Islam or Javanese religion as such. Instead it analyses the studies of Java that make use of these concepts.

My research starts with an analysis of several theoretical problems related to the concept of Javanese Islam: I look at the way it is used in scholarly literature and what its explanatory power is.

Firstly, I examine the description of Javanese Islam as a syncretist religion comprising of practices and beliefs from Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, animism and ancestor worship. I argue that applying this concept in order to describe the Javanese religious condition leads us into a logical inconsistency, which may even imply that the Javanese Muslims are either inauthentic or irrational -which is not satisfactory in explanatory terms to say the least.

Secondly, I look at the description of Javanese Islam in terms of assimilation: Javanese pre-Islamic beliefs and practices are said to have been Islamised, i.e. they have been brought in line with the teachings of Islam. This solves the mentioned logical inconsistency, but leaves us with two other issues. Firstly, there is a divide within Javanese Islamic thought itself: what for one Javanese Muslim is an acceptable assimilation is an unacceptable innovation or corruption of Islamic teachings (*bid'ah* and *kuhuraflat*) to another. This implies that there is a risk of calling Javanese Muslims heretics, which again is not a satisfying explanation. Secondly, as assimilation happens after syncretism has already been taking place, “syncretist” Javanese Islam and “assimilated” Javanese Islam refer to two different phenomena. Therefore, the conception of “assimilated” Javanese Islam actually obscures rather than solves the original inconsistency.

Thirdly, many different names have been used to refer to the same phenomenon: religion of the *abangan*, abanganism, *agami jawi*, mystic synthesis, Islam *kejawan*. Moreover, there is a long-running discussion on the nature of this religion -is it Islamic, animist, Hindu-Buddhist, syncretist,

etc.- which still has not been settled. This lack of clarity as to the name and nature of Javanese religion is in itself a serious indication of the theoretical and explanatory problems involved with “Javanese Islam”.

In order to get a handle on these issues I trace the origin of the concept of Javanese Islam. For this purpose, I have analysed the descriptions of religion in Java from the earliest sources up till now. I have focused on the following: terms of description (what is the religion of the Javanese called), on structuring concepts (with which concepts is the description structured), the conceptual framework (within which conceptual context does it make sense to speak of Javanese religion in these terms).

The result is a genealogy that shows a number of things. Firstly, there is a chain of descriptions running from the 15th century up till now. Each new phase builds upon the latter. There are remarkable continuities. Secondly, the discourse on Javanese Islam is a Western one. “Javanese Islam” was never a Javanese term of self-description until it was introduced to the Javanese through social sciences. Thirdly, the main concepts which lent structure to the descriptions of Javanese religion are (religious) belief and (religious) practice. The latter is taken as an expression or embodiment of the former. Fourthly, throughout the genealogy the conceptual framework hinges on two main assumptions: the universality of religion and a hierarchy of the world’s religion from less to more evolved or more abstract. This framework is theological in origin. Fifthly, both the conceptualisation of Javanese Islam in terms of syncretism and that in terms of an assimilation stem from the second half of the 19th century. In both cases these concepts are structured parallel to Christianity, with *slametan* as its core ritual and *ngelmu* as its central beliefs. In both cases the concepts make sense against theological backdrop.

On the basis of these findings I argue the following points. The contemporary discussion on the nature of Javanese Islam -is it syncretist or Islamic- actually repeats (unknowingly) standpoints and arguments from the latter half of the 19th century. The misrepresentation that is Javanese Islam did not come about as a tool of colonial hegemony, but is the result of Christian theology. There is no empirical or theoretical evidence for the existence of syncretist Javanese Islam. It makes more sense to speak of syncretist Javanese Islam as an experiential entity in the experi-



ential world of the West than as an entity in Javanese social and cultural reality.

In order to give more substance to the last point I offer a re-description of three constitutive concepts in the discourse of Javanese Islam, *wis̄ agama*, *slametan* and *ngelmu*, in performative or practical terms. I contrast these with the current descriptions. As a result *agama* is described as tradition (vs. religion); *slametan* as praxis pure and simple (vs. expression of religious belief); *ngelmu* as practical knowledge (vs. religious, spiritual or magical belief). For these re-descriptions I have used the same sources as were available to the mentioned genealogy. I argue that these re-descriptions are consistent and might offer the starting point for building an alternative understanding of Javanese traditions.

## Samenvatting

Deze dissertatie handelt niet over Javaanse Islam of Javaanse religie als dusdanig. Zij analyseert daarentegen de studies van Java die deze begrippen aanwenden.

Mijn onderzoek begint met een analyse van de verschillende theoretische problemen gerelateerd aan het concept van Javaanse Islam: ik bestudeer de manier waarop dit begrip gebruikt wordt in de wetenschappelijke literatuur en wat daarvan de verklarende kracht is.

Ten eerste onderzoek ik de beschrijving van Javaanse Islam als een syncretistische religie bestaande uit praktijken en geloven afkomstig van Islam, Hindoeïsme, Boeddhisme, animisme en voorouderverering. Ik betoog dat de beschrijving van de Javaanse religieuze conditie in deze termen uitmondt in een logische inconsistentie, die uiteindelijk zelfs kan impliceren dat de Javaanse Moslims ofwel inauthentiek ofwel irrationeel zijn -hetgeen in termen van verklaring op zijn zachtst gezegd niet bevredigend is.

Ten tweede bestudeer ik de beschrijving van Javaanse Islam in termen van assimilatie: Javaanse pre-Islamitische praktijken en geloven zijn geïslamiseerd, d.w.z. ze zijn in overeenstemming gebracht met de Islamitische leer. Deze beschrijving biedt een oplossing voor de vermelde logi-

sche inconsistentie, maar brengt twee nieuwe problemen met zich mee. Ten eerste is er een kloof binnen het Islamitisch denken zelf: wat voor één Javaanse Moslim een aanvaardbare assimilatie is, is voor een andere Javaanse Moslim een onaanvaardbaar geval van innovatie of corruptie van de Islamitische leer (*bid'ah* en *khurafat*). Dit impliceert het risico de Javaanse Moslim als ketter te bestempelen, hetgeen wederom geen bevredigende verklaring is. Ten tweede vindt assimilatie pas plaats nadat “syncretische” praktijken al een feit zijn. “Syncretistische” Javaanse Islam en “geassimileerde” Javaanse Islam verwijzen dus naar twee verschillende fenomenen. Bijgevolg verhuult het concept van “geassimileerde” Javaanse Islam de oorspronkelijke inconsistentie in plaats van dat het deze zou oplossen.

Ten derde, er wordt met de meest uiteenlopende termen gerefereerd naar hetzelfde fenomeen: religie van de *abangan*, abanganism, *agami jawi*, mystic synthesis, Islam *kejawan*. Daarenboven is er een langlopende discussie over de aard van deze religie -is zij Islamitisch, animistisch, Hindoe-Boeddhistisch, syncretistisch, etc.- die tot op heden nog niet beslecht is. Dit gebrek aan helderheid betreffende de naam en aard van Javaanse religie is op zich een ernstige indicatie van de theoretische problemen die “Javaanse Islam” omringen.

Om vat te krijgen op deze kwesties traceer ik de oorsprong van het concept “Javaanse Islam”. Hiertoe analyseer ik beschrijvingen van Javaanse religie, vanaf de vroegste bronnen tot nu. Hierbij focus ik op het volgende: de termen van beschrijving (hoe wordt de religie van de Javanen benoemd), de structurerende concepten (met welke concepten is de beschrijving gestructureerd), het conceptuele kader (binnen welk conceptueel kader is het logisch om in deze termen over Javaanse religie te spreken).

Het resultaat is een genealogie die een aantal zaken aantoont. Ten eerste is er een ketting van beschrijvingen die loopt van de 15e eeuw tot nu. Hierin bouwt elke nieuwe fase op de vorige. Er zijn opvallende continuïteiten. Ten tweede is het discours over Javaanse Islam een Westers discours. “Javaanse Islam” was geen concept waarmee Javanen zichzelf beschreven, tot de introductie ervan via de sociale wetenschappen. Ten derde, de concepten die structuur verlenen aan de beschrijvingen van Javaanse religie zijn (religieus) geloof en (religieuze) praktijk. De laatste

wordt aanzien als een uitdrukking of belichaming van het eerste. Ten vierde, doorheen de genealogie steunt het conceptuele kader op twee essentiële vooronderstellingen: de universaliteit van religie en de hiërarchie van 's werelds religies gaande van minder naar meer ontwikkeld of abstract. Dit kader is theologisch in oorsprong. Ten vijfde zijn zowel de conceptualisering van Javaanse Islam in termen van syncretisme en in termen van assimilatie ontstaan in de tweede helft van de 19e eeuw. In beide gevallen zijn deze concepten parallel gestructureerd aan Christendom, met *slametan* als het centrale ritueel en *ngelmu* als de centrale geloofsovertuigingen. In beide gevallen zijn de concepten enkel zinvol tegen een theologische achtergrond.

Op grond van deze vaststellingen argumenteer ik het volgende. De hedendaagse discussie over de aard van Javaanse Islam -is deze syncretistisch of Islamitisch- is eigenlijk een (onbewuste) herhaling van standpunten en argumenten van de tweede helft van de 19e eeuw. De misrepresentatie die Javaanse Islam is, ontstond niet als een werktuig van koloniale hegemonie, maar is het resultaat van Christelijke theologie. Er is geen empirisch of theoretisch bewijs voor het bestaan van een syncretistische Javaanse Islam. Het is zinvoller om syncretistische Javaanse Islam te beschouwen als een experiëntiële entiteit in de experiëntiële wereld van het Westen dan als een entiteit in de Javaanse sociale en culturele werkelijkheid.

Ten einde meer inhoud te geven aan dit laatste punt stel ik een herbeschrijving in performatieve of praktische termen voor van drie constitutionele concepten in het discours van Javaanse Islam, namelijk *agama*, *slametan*, *ngelmu*. Ik contrasteer deze herbeschrijvingen met de huidige beschrijvingen. Zodoende wordt *agama* beschreven als traditie (i.p.v. religie), *slametan* als eenvoudigweg praxis (i.p.v. een uitdrukking van religieus geloof) en *ngelmu* als praktische kennis (i.p.v. religieus, magisch of spiritueel geloof). Voor deze herbeschrijvingen maak ik gebruik van dezelfde bronnen die beschikbaar waren voor de vermelde genealogie. Ik argumenteer dat deze herbeschrijvingen consistent zijn en het startpunt zouden kunnen bieden voor de constructie van een alternatief begrip van Javaanse tradities.



## 15. Propositions

Stellingen behorende bij het proefschrift  
“Rethinking Javanese Islam.  
Towards new descriptions of Javanese traditions.”  
door Jochem van den Boogert

- I. The assumption of the universality of religion underlies the study of Javanese culture.
- II. Javanese Studies’ understanding of Javanese culture has been essentially informed by Christian (Protestant) theology. Both the conceptual reservoir with which Javanese traditions have been described and the way salient differences between Western and Javanese culture have been delineated are rooted in Christian theology. The creation of a Javanese religion is a case in point.
- III. The orientalist misrepresentation of Javanese Islam is not its reduction of Javanese Islam to a less than truly Islamic religion, but rather its concoction of a Javanese religion from (fragments of) Javanese traditions. It shares this misrepresentation with post-colonial scholarship.
- IV. Contemporary discussions within Javanese studies on the nature of Javanese Islam -e.g. Is it syncretist or Islamic?- merely repeat standpoints and arguments from the 19th century. The debate has not evolved in the last 150 years.
- V. The concept of syncretist Javanese Islam (a.k.a Javanism) did not have a Javanese equivalent prior to its introduction through the Western discourse on Javanese religion.

- VI. The concepts syncretist Javanese Islam and local Javanese Islam refer to two different phenomena.
- VII. It makes more sense to speak of (syncretist) Javanese Islam as an experiential entity in the experiential world of the West than as an entity in Javanese reality.
- VIII. Both the position that holds that Javanese Islam is a syncretist religion and the one that holds that Javanese Islam is a local or native form of Islam resort to arguments that are instances of *petitio principii*: they treat as evidence that what needs to be proven.
- IX. It makes little sense to think of the Enlightenment as a breaking away from theology. Most of Enlightenment thought is in fact secularised theology.
- X. Postcolonial scholarship all too often explains orientalist misrepresentations of non-Western cultures as tools of colonial hegemony. However, the fact that a concept has been used in colonial rhetoric is in itself not sufficient evidence for it originating from it. The postcolonial argument thus neither explains the origin, nor the specific shape and structure of orientalist misrepresentations.
- XI. Debunking someone's beliefs, opinions or knowledge is often mistaken for debunking the person who holds them.
- XII. "Of the desires, some are natural and necessary, some are natural but not necessary, and some are neither natural nor necessary, but owe their existence to vain imagination." (Epicurus) The desire to write a PhD dissertation appears to fall in the latter category.