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Rethinking Javanese Islam. Towards new descriptions of Javanese traditions

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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 orientalist. 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 unchartered territory between the fields of research of these three scholars.

