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Rethinking Javanese Islam. Towards new descriptions of Javanese traditions

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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 Yogyakartan 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,[1] 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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[1] 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 is 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 then 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[2]. 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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[2] 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[3]. 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

[3] 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 *Shahada*, 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."[4] (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)[5]. 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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[4] 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."

[5] 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 *kejawen* (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 Brumund 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 accordance 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 (*bidah* 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[6], 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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[6] 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[7]. 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[8]. 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)[9]. These actions also involve a large emotional investment.

[7] I thank Sarah Claerhout and Jakob De Roover for sharing this article with me.

[8] Werner Cohn is a German sociologist, currently Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of British Colombia. He has written extensively on gypsies.

[9] 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.