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Rethinking Javanese Islam. Towards new descriptions of Javanese traditions

Boogert, J.W.P. van den

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Author: Boogert, Jochem van den

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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 dissertation¹⁰.

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

¹⁰ 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 visit¹¹. 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

¹¹ 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 name¹². 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

¹² 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 period¹³. 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." (Corteseo 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*,

¹³ 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)¹⁴

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

¹⁴ 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)¹⁵

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)¹⁶

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

¹⁵ 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.”

¹⁶ 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)¹⁷

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

¹⁷ 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)¹⁸

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

¹⁸ 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)¹⁹

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-

¹⁹ 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 themes²⁰

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

²⁰ 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)²¹

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

²¹ 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)²²

²² 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)²³

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)²⁴

²³ 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.”

²⁴ My translation of: “... *Javamen*, 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)²⁵

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-

²⁵ 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.

