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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 4.5.1. The first Javanese Muslim

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 4.5.2. Javanism and the syncretist Javanese

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 4.5.3. Syncretist Javanese Islam

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 4.5.4. Summary

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

#### 4.6. Familiar themes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 4.6.5. Summary

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

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



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

#### 4.7. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

