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Rethinking Javanese Islam. Towards new descriptions of Javanese traditions

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

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

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

5.1. Conceptual context: religious experience and historical evolution

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

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

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

5.1.1. Religion as an answer to religious experience

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

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

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

5.1.2. Historical evolution of religions

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

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

5.1.3. Javanism as a 'primitive' religion

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

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

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

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

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

5.1.4. Javanism as a piece of Protestant Theology

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

One of the major consequences of this observation is that, as a concept, Harthoorn's Javanism, i.e. the indigenous, animist religion of the Javanese, is actually a piece of Protestant theology. We cannot reproach Harthoorn for his belief and faith in God. He is after all a missionary⁵⁵. This, however, does not imply that his 'facts' prove anything about Javanism. Consider the following: On what basis should we, as scientists, accept Harthoorn's facts as empirical evidence? After all, his argument is purely theological. It assumes, amongst other things, the universality of religion -i.e. each human has the capacity for religious experience. Therefore, structurally his argument is identical to the one we have heard in the chapters before. Instead of God giving religion to each man, now

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

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

5.2. Structuring concepts: belief and practice

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

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

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

5.2.1. Javanese beliefs: *ngelmu*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ngelmu and syncretism

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

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

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

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

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

Ngelmu and Javanese sects

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

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

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

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

5.2.2. Javanese religious practice: *slametan*

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

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

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

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

Poensen's and Harthoorn's take on the *slametan* makes all the more sense when we consider the role the Lord's Supper (or the Eucharist as it is known in Catholicism) in Christianity. The importance of this ritual, its meaning, and the centrality of it is completely determined by belief. Regardless of their denomination, Catholic or Protestant, all Christians consider it a 'memorial action' of the last supper of Jesus and his apostles (Eucharist 2014). Christians believe that when Jesus died at the cross, He made a sacrifice by which he took away the sins of mankind⁶⁰. This is believed to be the new covenant between God and man by which God has inscribed his laws into the heart of mankind -instead of the old covenant, i.e. the Ten Commandments, that were inscribed onto two

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

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

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

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

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

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

The *slametan* as a piece of Christian theology

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

5.2.3. Summary

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

5.3. On misrepresentation: theology and post-colonialism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At this point I would like to bring back to mind Werner Cohn's critique of anthropological descriptions of non-Western religions. As we saw in chapter one, an important point of his critique is that anthropologists identify non-Western religions along the lines of an observer's category, which he called *nacirema*. These *nacirema* involve actions or institutions that are recognised by the observer as salient and are consequently used to generate descriptions of non-Western religions. It is important to stress that it is the observer that invests these *nacirema* with this religious saliency and not the actual actor. The genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' I have sketched so far suggests that in the description of syncretist 'Javanese Islam', *ngelmu* and *slametan* are, as scholarly categories, observer's categories. That is, up to this point it is clear that Javanese Islam was recognised and described only by Western observers -travellers, orientalist, civil servants, missionaries. In this process, which spans several centuries, the Javanese voice was completely absent. Consequently, in these Western descriptions *ngelmu* and *slametan* are obvious instances of *nacirema*. After all, it was Western observers who endowed these phenomena with their religious saliency. It is here, if we follow Cohn's critique, that the observers implicitly switch categories: *ngelmu* and *slametan* factually belong to an observer's category, but are actually treated as instances of an actor's category⁶¹. In other words, *ngelmu* and *slametan* are described as, in Cohn's terminology, the "sacred institutions" of Javanese Islam in an identical manner as one would describe doctrines and the Lord's Supper as the "sacred institutions" of Protestantism. In the previous chapters I have spent considerable attention to the fact that Christian theology provided both the conceptual framework within which it makes sense to speak about a Javanese religion (be it 'Javanese Islam' or 'Javanism') and the structuring concepts with which these descriptions of this Javanese

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.3.2. The post-colonial alternative: local Islam

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

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

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

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

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

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

are indeed instances of a local, i.e. Javanese, Islam⁶³. We also see this circular argument in the work of Florida, when arguing that the “native Islam” of the Javanese is true Islam and not some Hindu-Buddhist worldview with a mere thin veneer of Islam (Florida 1997). One of her arguments is that the central-Javanese Surakartan *pujangga* (court poet) of the famous Yasadipura lineage were true Muslims, because they had all received a *santri*-education. However, despite the connotations of orthodoxy and piety the term *santri* carries today, in the days of the Yasadipura’s (almost the entire 18th and 19th century⁶⁴) a *santri*-education was rather an eclectic matter. Besides the study of Islamic texts, students (i.e. *santri*) also learnt things such as magic spells, different meditation techniques, medicine, calculating auspicious times, judging krisses, ... i.e. different kinds of knowledge of which the character is all but self-evidently Islamic (Drewes 1925: 77-112). In other words, the truly Islamic nature (as opposed to syncretist) of the *santri* is a contested topic (see e.g. Day 1981: 167-91; Drewes 1925: 190; Kumar 1985; Pigeaud 1938: 572-74). Consequently, Florida is taking as proof, as evidence, that what actually needs to be proven, viz. that *santri*-education was truly Islamic in the day and age of the Yasadipura’s. The same thing happens when Woodward argues that Islam has become the organising principle, i.e. the axioms, of

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

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

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

5.4. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

