Rethinking Javanese Islam. Towards new descriptions of Javanese traditions

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7. A new avenue? *Agama* and *slametan*

In the previous chapters we have discussed the theoretical problems surrounding the concept of syncretist Javanese Islam. As I argued, this concept cannot but be a misrepresentation, as it leads to a logical inconsistency, and consequently to a racist depiction of the Javanese. The two avenues open to us for resolving this inconsistency turned out to be unproductive. Firstly, denying this religion's Islamic essence (e.g. by referring to it as Javanism or *abangan* religion) resulted in the same theoretical problems. Secondly, I have dismissed native or local Islam as an alternative concept. I did so on the basis of the observation that the concepts 'syncretist Javanese Islam' and 'local/native Islam' actually refer to two different phenomena. Thus, the presence of Islam in Java and its assimilation of Javanese, pre-Islamic cultural and religious elements, in itself, cannot and does not debunk syncretist Javanese Islam. Consequently, we have not yet been able to establish what 'syncretist Javanese Islam' refers to in Javanese cultural reality. In other words, since 'syncretist Javanese Islam' is a misrepresentation, of *what* is it a misrepresentation? For the remainder of this dissertation I will try to give at least a partial answer to this question.

7.1. Javanese religion as an experiential entity

I would like to present a train of thought developed by S.N. Balagangadhara that helps us get to terms with the suggestion that (syncretist) 'Javanese Islam' or 'Javanism' does not exist. Furthermore, it offers an alternative to the post-colonial power-knowledge argument. Balagangadhara takes his cue from Said's characterisations of Orientalism as a set of constraints:

> " 'Orientalism is better grasped as a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought than it is simply as a positive doctrine' (Said 1978: 42). This means a 'limited vocabulary and imagery ... impose themselves as a consequence' (Said 1978: 60). That is to say, the limited vocabulary and imagery of the Orientalist discourse are the consequences of a set of constraints imposed upon western think-

ing in its attempts to understand a world manifestly different from
its own." (Balagangadhara and Keppens 2009: 54)

What set of constraints could have been working upon Western thinking
in its attempts to understand Javanese cultural reality? When Tomé Pires
is puzzled by the behaviour of the king of Tuban, which constraints led
him to conclude that the king was a superficial Muslim? Similarly, what
constraints led a Christophorus Schweitzer to estimate that the Javanese
were Muslim and Heathen at the same time? The conceptual framework
and the structuring concepts discussed in each step of our genealogy in-
dicate in which way Western thinking has been constrained. Only on the
basis of the assumption of the universality of religion and the concomi-
tant conceptualisation of certain practices as expressions of religious be-
liefs could Javanese religion be thus conceived. These constraints are ap-
parent in the way certain phenomena were questioned: they were ques-
tioned in terms of religion and the solution was offered in terms of re-
ligion as well. As I have repeatedly pointed out, these assumptions are in
origin Biblical or theological verities. And, even though the Bible may
have lost its status of being a true and exact description of the world
and its history, these same assumptions have maintained their constrain-
ing effect[77]. Thus, I would suggest, the West's thinking about and its at-
tempts to understand Javanese cultural reality are constrained by Western
theology.

Since the first Western visitors to Java were confronted with a culture
thoroughly alien to their own, it stands to reason then that energy and
time was invested in making sense of it. Their accounts of Java are both
a reflection on their experiences and an opportunity to structure them.
In fact, when we look at the succession of descriptions through the cen-
turies, it is striking how these become more and more structured. As
pointed out before in this dissertation, a loop came into being between
these accounts and the actual experience they describe. The former of-
fered the structures for the latter, while the latter came to confirm the

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[77] The process by which theological concepts have become common-sense verities in social
sciences is described in Balagangadhara 1994. A thorough discussion of this process, i.e. dou-
ble dynamic of religion, is out of the scope of this dissertation. For the purpose of this disser-
tation it suffices to point out that throughout the genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' we have seen a
continuity in the constraints within which this concept came about. Since the constraints are
theological in origin, we can dub them secularised theology.

former. Consequently, the constraints within which these Western accounts of Java were written, also constrained the Western experience of Java. Javanese religion (be it Javanism or Javanese Islam), then, came to be a part of the way the West described and experienced Java. In the words of Said:

> " 'I shall be calling *Orientalism* [emphasis in the original] a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the *Orient's special place in European Western experience.*' (Said 1978: 1; emphasis added)" (Ibid.: 52)

The Orient has a place in Western experience, or in Balagangadhara's terms, the Orient is an 'experiential entity' to Westerners. In other words, the Orient exists as an entity in the experiential world of the West. Javanese religion is a case in point. As we saw, Western observers in Java were confronted with phenomena they had trouble rendering intelligible. What they saw puzzled them: how can someone claim to be Muslim but behave in a way that is arguably un-Islamic[78]? By framing their observations in terms of religion, and consequently in terms of superficial or inauthentic Islam, they lent intelligibility to their experiences. The rendition of their observations in e.g. travel accounts helped to structure not only their own experiences, but also the experience of successive generations of observers. This is evidenced by how each new generation built on the descriptions of the former. These successive generations also reported on their experiences, thus giving substance and detail to the inherited structure, and further consolidating the Western experience of certain aspects of Javanese reality. This is how the loop between experience and description (of these experiences) came into being. In the process, phenomena that could not be structured accordingly were filtered out (Ibid.: 57-58). This is what Said means when speaking about the structuring and restructuring inherent in Orientalism. By selecting only those fragments of the Orient -or in this case Java's reality- that appear salient to Western observers, the first observers created a structure that seemed sensible to them. This structure was then continuously rehashed and thus fortified in consecutive descriptions (Said 2003 [1978]: 113-97). I have illustrated this structure by referring to familiar, i.e. sali-

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[78] For argument's sake, I am leaving open the question whether these observers had sufficient knowledge of Islam to make such judgements. The point is that something struck them and this was consistently framed in certain terms.

ent themes such as superficial faith, adherence to beliefs and practices from different religions, smooth conversion, and religious tolerance.

The genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' exemplifies the said loop. After the initial fragments have been selected -i.e. conceptualised as religious beliefs and practices- each phase represents a reenforcement of the initial structure and thus of the experiential entity that is Javanese Islam. However, the structure of the experiential entity does not self-evidently relate to a structure in Javanese cultural reality. That is to say, the Western descriptions of syncretist 'Javanese Islam' are descriptions of an experiential entity and not of an entity in Javanese reality. As I argued in the previous chapters, the genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' shows that empirical and theoretical proof for the existence of such a Javanese religion are lacking. In fact what we observed was how certain fragments of Javanese culture, those that appear salient to the West, were selected and became constituent elements of 'Javanese Islam'. This, I have argued, is how the *Gestalt* 'Javanism' or 'Javanese Islam' came into being. A case in point are *ngelmu* and *slametan*. 'Javanese Islam' being an experiential entity then implies that we do not know how such fragments are actually interconnected in reality, or even of what cultural phenomena they actually are fragments. In these last two chapters I hope to add more substance to this claim.

As we saw, *slametan* and *ngelmu* have been isolated and described as respectively a ritual expressing a Javanese worldview and as the religious beliefs of the Javanese. Through such descriptions syncretist Javanese religion, both 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism', became conceived of as a variant, albeit a pale variant, of the Semitic religions, such as Christianity and Islam. By describing Javanese religion as having its own core religious beliefs and doctrines (or worldview) and having its own central religious ritual, it becomes symmetrical to Semitic religions. This observation more or less corresponds with Werner Cohn's that anthropological accounts describe non-Western religions, such as the *abangan* religion, along the characteristics essential to Western religion. The former's essential characteristics however, are not the same as the latter's. The identification of Javanese religion as an experiential entity adds an extra dimension to this observation. If Javanese religion is an experiential entity in the experiential world of the West and if it does not exist in Javanese reality, then what are *slametan* and *ngelmu*? After all, in the absence of a

Javanese religion they cannot be its central ritual or its religious doctrines. In the remaining pages I will expound on the proposal that Javanese religion is a experiential entity. I will do so by reconsidering the data provided by ethnographic and anthropological accounts from Javanese Studies. For this I will make use of a heuristic.

7.2.   On cultural differences, a heuristic, and alternative descriptions

In the remainder of this dissertation I will attempt to generate partial alternative descriptions of three phenomena in Javanese culture: *agama*, *slametan* and *ngelmu*. *Agama* is commonly understood as religion, *slametan* as the central ritual of Javanese religious life, and *ngelmu* as the doctrines or beliefs of Javanese religion. As far as possible, I will contrast these common, prevalent descriptions with the alternative ones. For this I will draw on a hypothesis from the scholarly field of Vergelijkende Cultuurwetenschap (*Comparative Science of Cultures*), which allows us to partially describe cultural differences along the lines of cultural specific ways of learning. The hypothesis has it that cultures are configurations of learning (Balagangadhara 1994: 441-500; 2012: 13-33, 60-94). In the following paragraphs I will briefly paraphrase this hypothesis and discuss its relevance to the discussion at hand.

7.2.1.   Cultures as configurations of learning

Learning is the way by which we make a habitat. Humans are, more so than other animals, dependent upon their capacity for learning in order to make a habitat for themselves. They make a habitat not only in the natural world, but also in human groups. Thus, a human being needs to learn to live in the social environment and needs to learn to live in the bigger natural environment. One usually learns to live in the latter through living in the first. All human beings are socialised: they learn who the others in the group are, and what it means to live with them. This socialisation, i.e. this learning to live in a human group, depends on a reservoir of resources such as the traditions, customs and institutions of the group. The existence of such a reservoir implies the existence of certain constraints on what is transmitted and how this is transmitted.

On the one hand, the subject that is being transmitted has a constraining effect on the manner of transmission. For example, learning Newton's law of inertia is different from how one learns to tie one's shoelaces. On the other hand, the mechanisms of transmission have developed over time -through trial and error, conscious deliberation, unintended discoveries. In this sense, differences between cultures can be characterised along the lines of the constraints on the ways of transmission.

These constraints on the what and the how of transmission can also be seen as constraints on the production of knowledge -which is after all the end result of a learning process. Hence, differences between cultures can be understood as the differences between the ways their knowledge production is structured or patterned.

A learning process has two sides, teaching and learning, and the success of a learning process depends on the teaching dovetailing with the learning. Moreover, a process of learning (i.e. a learning process consisting both of teaching and learning) also involves meta-learning: learning how to learn. That is, not only does the 'teacher' draw on the resources of the human group, but the 'learner' does so as well: he/she learns to learn in a particular way. This meta-learning, then, can be seen as the way to structure or to form learning, i.e. as the way to bring forth knowledge (Balagangadhara 1994: 446). Therefore, the differences between learning processes are also present on the level of this meta-learning.

Balagangadhara suggests that within each human group there are different learning processes (and consequently different kinds of knowledges): e.g. a learning process to build societies and groups, one to create poetry and music, one to make theories and speculation, and so on (2012: 29-30). Many other kinds of learning could be discerned. The difference between cultures can then be mapped according to the way these learning processes have been structured:

> "What is specific to cultures, that is, what makes some group into a culture, can be picked out along the following lines: something is used to structure different goings-about in the world. This entity gives birth to a process of learning to learn. Because this process is a configuration of different kinds of learning-activities, each one of them generates its own meta-learning. It is 'a process' because, in this configuration, one kind of learning activity is *dominant*. It

> subordinates other kinds of learning activities to itself. I should like to call such configurations of learning processes as culture-specific ways of learning." (Balagangadhara 1994: 446; italics in original)

These different kinds of learning processes are thus coordinated that one learning process has become dominant, and the others subordinated. This means that one kind of meta-learning dominates the other learning-processes and their meta-learning. Three caveats. Firstly, this hypothesis does not suggest that there is only one learning process present in a culture, or that the subordinated learning processes do not get transmitted. Secondly, a configuration of learning should be seen in developmental terms. That is to say, such a configuration comes into being over a long period of time, through the coordination of the different learning processes. It is stable to the extent a culture is and it is complete only to the extent a culture can be. Thirdly, by characterising a culture in terms of that which brings about a culture-specific way of learning, it can also be characterised in terms of its culture-specific knowledge (Ibid.: 447). Consequently, even though all kinds of knowledges are present in each culture, these knowledges are produced in a culture-specific way, i.e. by a specific configuration of learning.

7.2.2.   Two implications so far

The extent to which an individual is capable of acquiring the meta-learning, is paralleled by his/her ability to draw upon the resources of socialisation that in turn determines to what extent he/she can build, sustain and alter the structure of his/her experience (Balagangadhara 2012: 30-33). That is to say, there is not only an individual side to one's personal experience, but also a social side, a side that is shared with its group, and that has been brought forth by the configuration of learning. In this sense we should understand how it is possible for Western observers to have a shared experience of a Javanese religion.

Given that there are cultural differences between the West and Java, we can now start thinking of these differences in terms of their respective dominant learning processes. If we follow the reasoning as laid out

above, we should expect that in Java a different learning process is dominant than in the West.

7.2.3.   Two different configurations of learning

Balagangadhara suggests that in the West "a root model of order" has brought about the culture-specific learning process (Balagangadhara 1994: 448-60). By structuring the experience of the world, this "root model of order" brings about a specific configuration of learning that has made theoretical knowledge dominant[79]. This kind of knowledge can be typified as 'knowing about'. For the purpose of our discussion, I will merely present a characterisation in broad strokes. Firstly, the attitude that comes with a configuration of learning where theoretical knowledge is dominant, is one that primarily seeks knowledge about and sees the world as a place to discover and decipher, to seek and discover its regularities. Hence, knowledge about the world is knowledge of what is in the world. Secondly, such knowledge is considered to be verbal: it is to be communicated through and accumulated in words. These, in turn, can be interpreted, argued, etc. A typical example would be that psychological problems should first be voiced, these utterances are then interpreted and analysed, only then can they be solved or treated, usually by more talking. Thirdly, it implies that *knowing*-about is a prerequisite for *going*-about in the world. Activities in the world are to be guided by knowledge about the world. For example, in order to be a friend one must know what a good friend is; in order to build a society one must know what a good society is; in order to be fair, one must know what fairness is, etc.

Balagangadhara also sketches an Asian configuration of learning. His characterisation starts from the question of how to live. Given that human groups face the same or similar predicaments in going-about in the

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[79] It will lead us too far to discuss where this "root model of order" stems from. Here I can only point out that it has come about as a result of the Christianisation of the West. Since Christianity is, to its believers, a message about the entire cosmos, it inculcates a certain attitude within them, viz. the expectation that the world is ordered and that it expresses the will of God. Man's task is to discover that order or God's will. The inculcated attitude is one of knowing about, of intelligibility through knowing the explanation of something. For a thorough discussion, see Balagangadhara (1994).

wider world, this question confronts both West and East. In his hypothesis, the question can be treated in (minimally) two different ways and the different configurations of learning can be seen as different answers to that same question of biological survival. The first answer, the 'Western' answer, is finding out *what* there is in the place where we live, and take it from there. The second answer, the 'Asian' answer, is to treat this question "as a problem to go-about in the world" and consequently the answer becomes performative in nature (ibid.: 460). In this case, the configuration of learning is dominated by a practical or performative learning process. This practical learning process has subordinated the other learning processes:

> "the 'object' of thinking about must be the activities of going-about; the purpose of thinking about is to improve these activities; but because the activities are the dominant ones in the configuration, thinking about these actions does not provide the foundation to going-about the world, but as its critic." (ibid.: 462)

That which structures the configuration of learning must itself be a structured set of goings-about in the world. This structured set of goings-about in the world is itself performative in nature and also generates a meta-learning (learning how to learn)[80]. Consequently, this structured set of goings-about answers the question of how to live, not by building a view of the world, but by developing an *ability* to try and live the best way possible. It does so not by imparting knowledge *about*, but by imparting practical knowledge, knowledge of *how-to*.

In summary, I take from Balagangadhara's hypothesis only the following suggestion: the difference between Western culture and Asian, *in casu* Javanese, culture can be described in terms of the dominant type of knowledge (i.e. the end result of a learning process). As a result, we wind up with the following contrast-set: theoretical knowledge versus practical, performative knowledge. The first deals with knowing-about, the second with knowing-how-to. The end result of the first is abstract

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[80] Here too, I need to restrict the discussion of what brings about a 'performative' configuration of learning to a bare minimum. Balagangadhara suggests that a "structured set of goings-about" has brought about this configuration of learning. Such an entity would be described as "a-intentional, agent-less, and goal-less", and ritual in Asia seems to meet these requirements (Balagangadhara 1994: 465).

knowledge, the end result of the second is a skill. In the remainder of my dissertation I will attempt to generate a partial characterisation of *agama*, *ngelmu* and *slametan* by using this idea of practical or performative knowledge as a heuristic. This implies that I am not pretending to offer an alternative explanation of these Javanese phenomena. Firstly, the hypothesis is pitted a level that is too abstract to do this. After all, the proposal to consider 'Asian culture' as a configuration of learning is so broad that we cannot spell out the conditions under which it would be true or false. Therefore, I would like to stress the speculative and tentative character of the hypothesis. It is designed to get a handle on a specific problem, *in casu* that of describing cultural differences, and not as a description of 'Asian' reality. The proposal thus entails the suggestion to describe the differences between 'Western' and 'Eastern' cultures (or any culture for that matter) in terms of knowledge. The proposal further suggests to consider practical knowledge to be dominant in 'Eastern' cultures and theoretical knowledge to be dominant in the West. Secondly, the relative absence of alternative *descriptions* (as contrasted to those who mirror Western religious practices), makes it impossible to even start such an enterprise of *explaining*. Therefore, the characterisations I will be generating are merely a modest attempt to start filling that void. As such, it is but one of the preliminary steps to a truly alternative explanation.

7.2.4. Configurations of learning: a new Orientalism?

Some readers might think of my usage of Balagangadhara's hypothesis on cultures as configurations of learning as just another Orientalism. There are, as far as I can see, three possible ways in which they could make their case.

Firstly, one could say that I, as a Westerner, have taken it upon myself to describe a non-Western culture, *in casu* a Javanese one. In this case one could assume that by being a Westerner I am the captive of a Western framework, one which I will never be able to overcome: I am doomed to apply Western categories to a non-Western culture, and hence misrepresentation of Javanese culture is inevitable. If we take this critique in the most charitable way -i.e. I will not go into the fact that I am making use of a hypothesis developed by an Indian scientist, and therefore that in order to claim this is an Orientalist hypothesis along the above lines one would need to further explain how his hypothesis reflects a Western

framework- it is a question about the scientificity of the hypothesis. Such a question deals amongst others with its explanatory and heuristic force, its testability or falsifiability, and the extent to which it rests upon (unwarranted) assumptions. The last point is the one relevant to the issue at hand, as we are discussing suspicions of Orientalism. Keeping in mind that Balagangadhara's hypothesis has been brought in with the aim of describing cultural differences, we should compare the assumptions it makes and the assumptions the well-known Orientalist hypothesis makes. (For argument's sake I am equating what I have identified as a theological framework in the course of this dissertation with the 'Orientalist hypothesis'.) The latter is based on the assumption of the universality of religion and the concomitant idea that differences between cultures can be mapped according to their religions. As I have argued throughout this dissertation this assumption is, if not flat-out false, at least highly contested and both in origin and in essence a Western, Christian theological, assumption. The former merely assumes that humans are very apt at learning (hardly an assumption) and that humans dispose over several learning processes instead of one. (Its suggestion of configurations of learning processes and the role a root model of order would play in these configurations are the actual hypothesis and should not be taken as an assumption upon which a hypothesis is based.) If we compare these two assumptions then I think it is safe to state that the second not only fares a lot better, it is hardly to be considered an Orientalist assumption.

Secondly, one could argue that I am juxtaposing East to West, as did the orientalists of yore, thereby committing the orientalist sin of dichotomy or that of binary opposition. However, one might ask, what is so intrinsically reproachable about binary oppositions or dichotomies? Is a trichotomy by definition better than a dichotomy? And would a quadchotomy be even better? etc. Are we, ever since Said's critique on Orientalist knowledge, no longer allowed to compare two objects (cultures in this case) lest we want to be chastised as orientalists? Obviously, such a stance would be indefensible. Therefore, I propose that the problem is not so much that I am employing Balagangadhara's hypothesis to juxtapose an Eastern to a Western culture, i.e. to make a dichotomy, but rather that I discuss such entities in terms of an Eastern and a Western culture. Do these entities actually exist? Where to draw the boundaries? What is East? What is West? Are East and West as concepts not very

vague -or fluid, porous, amorphous? And is the way of characterising these two cultures not somehow an unwarranted reduction or generalisation?

In other words, and this is the third possibility, one might argue that I am being essentialist. After all, am I not characterising Western culture as essentially Christian or essentially theoretical and Eastern culture as essentially ritualistic or essentially practical? Although it might be tempting to interpret the way I employ Balagangadhara's hypothesis in this way, there are at least three considerations that would refute such an evaluation. Firstly, the suggestion of a configuration of learning allows to think of cultures as harbouring many different kinds of knowledge, of which theoretical and practical are but two kinds. The suggestion that one of these knowledges has become dominant does not imply a reduction of all other knowledges to that one kind. Therefore, the proposal that Western culture can be characterised by its penchant for theoretical knowledge, and Asian culture by its tendency to practical knowledge is not an identification of these cultures' essences. Actually, the idea of a configuration of learning leaves open the possibility to envisage many differences and nuances and in no way then does this hypothesis reduce Western or Asian culture to a monolithic entity -another typical postcolonial reproach. Secondly, it would not be correct to think of these configurations as fixed. That is, this hypothesis does not make claims about some unchanging essence in the cultures of the West and East. The suggestion that in the West theoretical knowledge has become dominant also implies the possibility of it becoming subordinated. In other words, in this hypothesis culture is taken to be changing over time. The hypothesis thus allows to describe a given culture both at a certain point in time as over a longer period of time. Thirdly, in this hypothesis it is suggested that in the West there is something that has enabled theoretical knowledge to become dominant over time. This entity is identified as religion, in particular Christianity. A similar suggestion is made with regard to Asian culture: the ubiquitous presence of ritual has enabled practical knowledge to become dominant. These suggestions are obviously something completely different than an identification of Christianity as the essence of the West and ritual as the essence of the East. At no point does Balagangadhara's hypothesis on cultures make such statements. Being a hypothesis, it does nothing more than propose a conjecture that may allow us (at some point) to come to a better understanding

of the subject at hand, *in casu* cultural differences. In my dissertation I have used this hypothesis as a heuristic, i.e. I have used it to generate 'new' partial descriptions of certain phenomena in Javanese cultural reality. My aim has thus been much more modest than a characterisation of the essence of Javanese culture, let alone Asian culture.

If it is indeed the case that in my adoption of Balagangadhara's hypothesis I have made no statements about the essences of West and East (neither explicit nor implicit), if I am not guilty of the crime of dichotomisation, and if I have made no assumptions that are demonstrably Western in origin, then I believe it would be incorrect to regard my account as yet another Orientalism.

7.3.   An asymmetry: *agama* as tradition vs. *agama* as religion

Today in Java (and in the whole of Indonesia) *agama* means religion. What constitutes a religion in Indonesia is a quite clear-cut affair, since the ratification as a religion is regulated by the Ministry of religion. In order to be recognised as such, "... a religion must be revealed by God, possess a prophet and a holy book, have a codified system of law for its followers, and further, it should enjoy international recognition and not be limited to one single ethnic group" (Picard 2011: 13). Today, then, there are only 6 official religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism[81]. The invasive, if not pernicious, effects of this policy on some of Indonesia's religious and spiritual traditions can be illustrated by, on the one hand, Hinduism and, on the other, the *aliran kebatinan* or *aliran kepercayaan*. The first, which in academic literature is considered to be all but a monotheistic religion, has had to reinvent itself as such in order to be acknowledged. Robert Hefner for example relates how the Tenggerese Hindu community in East-Java has come increasingly under the influence of Hindu reform movements that apply (or impose?) this government approved version of Hinduism (Hefner 1985: 247-65). The second, being the category name for a plethora of Javanese spiritual traditions, actually contains a number of 'sects' or spiritual groups that strictly speaking would match the definition of a modern day *agama*. However, the *aliran kepercayaan* have come

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[81] Recently, Bahá'í faith seems to have been added to the list.

to resort under the authority of the Ministry of Education and Culture and are thus effectively not recognised as religions (Patty 1986: 72-73; Picard 2011: 13). This conceptualisation of *agama*, according to Picard, builds on a Christian definition of religion and then on an Islamic evaluation of it (2011: 3). The concept of *agama* has been pitted against that of *adat* or tradition. *Adat* is an Arabic loanword and in the whole Islamic world signifies those customs that do not have an explicit Islamic legitimation (Van Bruinessen 1999: 167 in Picard 2011: 6). Such practices are usually the customs or lore that belong to specific social or ethnic groups. However, by dubbing such customs as *adat* they have become neutralised. That is to say, they are no longer considered as challenges to Islam and their status has somehow been reduced to folklore, superstition, or 'old-fashioned ways'.

Agama as *adat*

Picard argues that the concept of *agama* used to be conflated with the concept of *adat* (ibid.: 6). This means that *agama* was actually considered an *adat*, i.e. a tradition. In general terms, traditions are usually considered to be fixed sets of practices handed down from generation to generation. What then could it imply for an *agama* to be a tradition? Drawing on Jan Gonda's 1973 *Sanskrit in Indonesia*, Picard lists the different meanings of *agama* in Sanskrit and Old Javanese. Here we find that *agama* means, amongst others: "anything handed down as fixed by tradition"; "a body of customary law"; "religious and moral traditions"; "the religious knowledge of a brahman (...) and also of a high Buddhist functionary"; moreover, "the words *sang hyang* 'the divine, holy' often preceding it emphasize its superhuman character" (ibid.: 3-4). This approximation of *agama* in the Javanese sense -in contrast to the current official, Indonesian sense- gives us a point of departure for an alternative to the Western, orientalist description of Javanese religion. At this point I need to draw attention to an important caveat: in the following reflection I am not presupposing that *agama* as *adat* and *agama* as religion delineate the same set of phenomena. Neither am I presenting *agama* as *adat* as an overarching term for the Javanese practices that have been discussed so far and will be discussed below (such as *slametan* and *ngelmu*). I am making no such assumptions. Instead what I will be doing is merely reflect upon

the possible ramifications of the conceptualisation of *agama* as *adat*. In other words, if *agama* is indeed a tradition -i.e. a fixed set of practices handed down from generation to generation- then it might be possible to deduce a number of its characteristics. I will then consult a very limited number of sources to see if such an approach might be fruitful. The sources are limited in number, and also restricted in time and place. Therefore, they cannot be taken as representing the Javanese view on *agama*, *ngelmu*, and *slametan* through the ages and in all layers of Javanese society. The investigation presented here should thus be regarded as preliminary in character.

Firstly, a tradition is upheld for tradition's sake. This implies that there is no need for an exterior reason for upholding it. After all, one practices one's tradition, because that is the way of one's ancestors, and has been handed down as such. However, *agama* as religion revolves around belief. For example one becomes a Christian because one believes that God exists and the Bible contains his message. Christians uphold their rituals out of belief: e.g. Catholics join in the Eucharist because it is believed to be the sacrament through which God's grace is bestowed upon the partakers. However, the Javanese original conception of *agama* is one in terms of a tradition. Therefore, in Javanese descriptions of *agama* as tradition we would expect them to motivate their adherence to it on the basis of it being a tradition, and not on the basis of belief.

Some readers might feel compelled to challenge this contrast set. One may want to argue that one does not become Christian out of belief, but because one follows the ways of one's parents. There is of course some truth to this rebuttal. If one has Christian parents than obviously it is much more likely to become a Christian than e.g. a Muslim or a Buddhist. In that sense one indeed follows the ways of one's parents. However, this ignores the process by which one becomes a (full) member of a Christian community. This can be illustrated by baptism, the sacrament by which one is admitted and adopted into the Church. Although in many strands of Christianity baptism only takes place when the person to be baptised is of a certain age which allows him/her to understand and comply with the baptism, in Catholicism one is usually baptised as an infant. In the first instance one is indisputably familiar with the underlying belief of the ritual, which in the end is the reason for being baptised. In the second case the baptised person really doesn't have a choice

and one could argue that here, instead of being motivated by belief, one is forced to follow in one's parents footsteps. However, in Catholicism baptism -which is a sacrament that is necessary to have access to the kingdom of heaven- is only complete when one has also fulfilled the sacrament of confirmation, which is the true confession to Christ. This ritual usually takes place at the age of twelve and is preceded by a period of intense catechism in which the soon to be catechised learn amongst others the meaning and purpose of the ritual. Therefore, even if those taking part in the ritual of baptism or confirmation do so out of pressure (because their parents did so), their understanding of and motivation for the ritual is not predicated on the idea that it is (merely) a tradition. Similarly, if one would ask these Christians why they partake in the Eucharist, the reason would hardly be because one upholds the traditions of one's ancestors. Such an answer would actually make one's adherence the Church suspect. Contrary, in the case of Java we have seen that such an answer is perfectly acceptable. It is on the basis of these considerations that I argue for the proposed contrast set.

Secondly, if *agama* is a tradition, it is logical to expect that its distinguishing trait is practice, or the way it is practised. Distinctions between *agama* as religion are made first and foremost on the basis of their respective beliefs. Should we, for example, want to set Islam apart from Christianity then the most direct way surely would be to point out the difference in beliefs between these two: e.g. while Christians believe Jesus was the son of God, the Messiah and thus the fulfilment of the old covenant, to Muslims he is but one prophet in a long line of prophets of which Mohammed is actually the last and final one. However, in *agama* as tradition we would expect a focus on the practice of it. We would therefore expect that distinctions between different *agama* are expressed in terms of practice rather than in terms of belief.

Thirdly, If *agama* is indeed a fixed set of *practices*, then we should see a difference between the way *agama* as tradition and *agama* as religion approach the matter of truth. It is common knowledge that Semitic religions (certified cases of *agama* in the contemporary Indonesian sense) make claims about being the truth. Consider how both Christians and Muslims believe that the revelation as recorded in the Bible and *Qur'an* respectively is the truth. Moreover, their truths are exclusivist. For example, either Jesus is the Messiah, or he is merely a prophet in a line of

prophets. Accepting either of these two doctrines as true, excludes the other one as false. In this sense, different *agama* as religion are competitors for the truth. However, *agama* as a praxis cannot be true or false. Ascribing such predicates to a practice would actually be a category mistake. It would make no sense to claim that this or that execution of a ritual is the *truth*. While it would make sense to claim that this or that way of performing a ritual is the *right* way. Although, *agama* as tradition might be considered a *way* to reach the truth (say, the true nature or the essence of life) this is still different from it being the truth. Different *agama* as tradition, then, are different *ways* to reach that truth. Thus, it would be logical to expect a focus on correct praxis rather that correct belief: orthopraxy instead of orthodoxy. Consequently, we would expect expressions of this sentiment in Javanese descriptions of their spiritual traditions.

Fourthly, as traditions are fixed sets of practices handed down from generation to generation, they become tied to a particular social group. In other words, this specific way of doing things becomes the way a specific group does things. This is obviously the case with e.g. certain traditional dances or festivities which today would fall under the category of folklore. In a similar vein, we would expect the Javanese to describe *agama* as tradition as tied to a specific social group. Contrary to this is how *agama* as religion explicitly aims at transcending social and national boundaries. After all, religions such as Christianity and Islam claim to be the truth, that is a universal truth, and consequently, they cannot be tied exclusively to one social group.

With these four threads I have attempted to contrast *agama* as tradition with *agama* as religion. In what follows my goal is not to develop an alternative understanding of 'Javanese Islam' or 'Javanism' or redefine them in terms of tradition. After all, my claim is that Javanese religion is only an experiential entity in the Western experience of Java, and not an entity in Javanese reality. My aim, then, is to show that the few Javanese descriptions of Javanese *agama* (as tradition) we have, do show a certain consistency. We can map this consistency along the heuristic drawn from Balagangadhara's hypothesis. That is, we are looking for instances of performative, practical knowledge. So far, we have already been able to sketch *agama* as a tradition, i.e. as a fixed set of practices. In the paragraphs below, I will look at how the Javanese themselves seem to reflect on the *slametan* and *ngelmu*. Do these 'self-descriptions' show an inclina-

tion to performative or practical knowledge? Do they corroborate or rebut the conventional description in terms of '*agama* as religion'?

7.4.   The Javanese *slametan*: belief and praxis

As discussed in chapter five, two phenomena take a pivotal place in the description of Javanese religion: *slametan* and *ngelmu*. They are essential building blocks in this concept. Consequently, sooner or later one needs to deal with these two phenomena, both in descriptions of Javanese religion as a syncretist religion (Islamic or otherwise) and as a local Islam that has assimilated Javanese cultural elements. Here I will look at the possibility of a re-description of the *slametan*.

There is probably little (if any) disagreement that of all the Javanese traditions the *slametan* is the most essential. It is said to be at the very heart of the religious life of the Javanese (Geertz 1964 [1960]; Schweizer 1989: 297-98; Beatty 1999: 50). It is performed on momentous occasions such as circumcision, pregnancy, death, or on certain dates of the Muslim calendar such as the birth of the Prophet. It can be performed on its own, in a stand-alone fashion, or as a part of a larger ritual, e.g. local traditions such as *bersih desa* (cleaning of the village), the well-documented Yogyakartan *Labuhan* tradition at Mount Merapi, Mount Lawu and the beach of Parangkusumo (Adam 1940: 104-18; Bigeon 1982; Schlehe 1996), or in the *Petik Laut* in Puger Jember. The aim of a *slametan* is said to be the advancement of a state of *slamet*, which is usually described as a state of equanimity, a state 'in which nothing happens'. However, the ritual is also often performed to secure the positive outcome of certain undertakings (e.g. a safe journey) or to rectify certain mishaps (e.g. Mulder 2005 [1998]: 43). Since the *slametan* is commonly a neighbourhood ritual, i.e. the participants are all from the same neighbourhood, it is said to cut across religious divides. Usually this means that Javanese Muslims, both those inclined to orthodoxy and the more nominal, join in the same ritual regardless of their religious dispositions. Consequently, the *slametan* is credited with raising (religious) tolerance and social harmony (e.g. Beatty 1999: 49-50).

The *slametan* has a fixed structure, which is consistently depicted in the same way (e.g. Geertz 1964 [1960]: 12-14; Hefner 1985: 104-10; Robson

1985: 634; Woodward 1988: 72-81; Schweizer 1989: 299-300; Koent-jaraningrat 1989 [1985]: 346-48; Kim 1996: 112-15; Hilmy 1999: 54-59; Newberry 2007: 1309-15). This structure is usually described as follows. The preparation of the food for the prayer portion of the *slametan* is the activity in which the women are most involved. The guests (men only) usually are invited to the *slametan* by one of children of the host. In most cases this is not too long after sunset. When the guests arrive, they find the food for the actual prayer meal already displayed in the centre of the room. It traditionally consists of cones of yellow rice (*sega kuning*), side dishes of fish eggs, meat, vegetables, fruit, and tea. Usually incense is burned. The host delivers the *ujub*, an opening speech in which he states the purity of his intentions, the specific purpose of the slametan (e.g. the seventh month of the pregnancy of his daughter), and he apologises for his lack of eloquence and the inadequacy of the food. Subsequently, the prayer (*do'a* or *donga)* is pronounced, usually by the *modin* (mosque official). It often contains the *fatihah* (this is the first chapter of *Qur'an* and a common prayer in the Muslim world) but sometimes other more suited passages from the Qur'an are chosen. When the *modin* pronounces the last part of the *donga* the guests hold their palms up, and upon his pause say *amin*, rub their face with their palms as to absorb the blessings from heaven. After this, the *modin* is invited to start the meal. The food is divided, some is eaten on the spot, the rest is taken home by the guests.

Below, I will offer three different explanations of the *slametan* which, taken together, are representative of the current understanding in Javanese Studies. In a subsequent section I will contrast these with fragments of Javanese descriptions or reflections on the *slametan* ritual.

7.4.1.   The representation of *slametan* in Javanese Studies

In order to sketch the prevalent understanding of *slametan* I will draw on the explanations of three authors: Clifford Geertz, Andrew Beatty, and Mark Woodward. Although these authors might have disagreements as to the religious core of the *slametan* ritual, there is a remarkable convergence in the way they explain it.

Two caveats. Firstly, for the sake of argument, I deliberately ignore the diachronic dimension of the discussion of *slametan*. One could, after all,

argue that the *slametan* has over time become more and more Islamised. Therefore different explanations of the *slametan* can be brought back to their level of being Islamised. As fascinating as such a study would be, it is out of the ambit of my dissertation. Moreover, here I am concerned with the *way* the *slametan* is explained. Secondly, I do not deal with studies that treat the economic, political and social aspects of the *slametan*. It has for example been described as a ritual that reproduces the Indonesian state on a local level (Newberry 2007: 1324) or as a means of redistribution (Woodward 2011: 114-15). Whether or not the *slametan* has such functions, explanations of the *slametan* ritual itself, always (and seemingly inevitably) draw upon its meaning, i.e. on an underlying set of beliefs or a worldview. The following paragraphs illustrate this observation.

The *slametan* as an expression of the *abangan* worldview

To Geertz the *slametan* is the core ritual of the *abangan* religion and understanding this ritual is the key to the *abangan* worldview. The purpose of the *slametan*, the state of *slamet*, is achieved by placating spirits who then after the *slametan* will no longer bother you. The world of the *slametan* participants is thus one inhabited by spirits and the *slametan* is the way to deal with them (Geertz 1964 [1960]: 14).

This understanding of the *slametan* as an expression of the animistic belief in spirits and their impact on human wellbeing has been picked up by many scholars in Geertz' wake. A good example is Thomas Schweizer's research into the "economic individualism" and "community spirit" of the Javanese. He recognises a reflection of the social sphere in the *slametan,* as well as an expression of certain Javanese values as they relate to the "individualism-communitarian dimension in Javanese society" (Schweizer 1989: 278). However, just as Geertz would have had it, the deeper sense of the *slametan* is religious and the performance of it finds its motivation in the Javanese worldview where the danger of losing one's *slamet* is averted by the implementation of the *slametan*:

> "The harmonious implementation of a slametan in the community protects the affected person from these crises and is a plea for heavenly blessings on his life's path. These conceptions refer to the constitutive rules in the world-view and ethic of urban Javanese

and to the Hindu-Buddhist background of these beliefs."
(Schweizer 1989: 298)

This understanding of the *slametan* relies on the assumption that there is an underlying belief in spirits that motivates the Javanese to execute the ritual. The beliefs in turn are traced back to animist, or Hindu-Buddhist origins.

The *slametan* as the expression of a syncretist worldview

The *slametan* is also often understood as a syncretist ritual. It can be interpreted so in two ways: as the expression of a syncretist worldview, or as a 'syncretising' of multiple worldviews. The latter interpretation will be discussed below. How does the *slametan* express a syncretist worldview? It does so by harbouring elements from different religious traditions that are *strictu sensu* incompatible, but somehow have been reconciled. The *ujub* and the *donga* are such elements. The *ujub* and the meal itself are regarded as an expression of the belief in spirits and deities -that is, of animism, ancestor worship or Hinduism. The *donga* is regarded as the expression of the belief in Allah -that is, of Islam. On this basis one can perceive a fundamental incompatibility. After all, the belief in Allah is predicated upon the principle of the unity of Allah, which strictly speaking implies that the worship of any other entity than Allah, such as Dewi Sri, Vishnu or an ancestor, constitutes *shirk* and thus is not permitted. However, while this is exactly what happens within the *slametan* ritual, it does not seem to pose a problem. Therefore, because of this 'reconciliation' of incompatible beliefs, the ritual is considered syncretist. Madras Hilmy's understanding of *slametan* provides a variation to this explanation. To Hilmy, the *slametan* ritual is the expression of a Javanese Islamic worldview, which in its turn is characterised as essentially syncretist (1999: 48). Javanese Islam is thus seen as a syncretist blend of doctrines and beliefs that underlies ritual practices such as the *slametan*. Here too the representation of the *slametan* as syncretist is predicated upon the presence of doctrines or beliefs pertaining to a syncretist worldview.

The syncretist *slametan* as the expression of multiple worldviews

In Andrew Beatty's thought provoking research on the practice of *slametan* in the area of Banyuwangi the above explanation receives a new twist: instead of just one worldview, the *slametan* actually expresses three worldviews. In Beatty's account the syncretist *slametan* ritual is explained as a way to reach societal harmony in the face of religious differences. Within the context of his fieldwork, Beatty distinguishes three religious groups: the *santri*, i.e. more orthodox or pious muslims; the village muslims, i.e. more nominal muslims; and the mystics, i.e. those who adhere to an indigenous spirituality which Beatty calls Javanism. The *slametan*'s symbolism is open to different interpretations according to the different religious affiliations of the participants:

> "At the risk of overschematizing, one might say that the santri reads into the symbols an Islamic cosmogony; the ordinary indifferent villager places them in a familial context; and the mystic refers everything back to the self." (Beatty 1999: 38)

Each of these varying interpretations is actually the expression of a different world view, or in Beatty's words: "Each variant embodies -sometimes only suggests- a different conception of the world and one's place within it" (ibid.: 239). To Beatty a key part of the *slametan* ritual is public exegesis of the ritual's symbolism by which a systematic integration of very disparate ideas is achieved. Social compromise is then reached "by means of their combined expression in ritual" (ibid.: 40). Therefore, instead of the expression of one worldview, the *slametan* actually expresses three different worldviews and does so at the same time. This quality, which Beatty calls syncretism, enables social harmony and religious tolerance. In this study too, then, the *slametan* is described and understood as the embodiment of beliefs, of different worldviews. Only by virtue of describing the ritual as allowing the expression of different beliefs by persons of different religious persuasions, is it possible to regard the *slametan* as a syncretist ritual.

The *slametan* as the expression of an Islamic worldview

Woodward, as we have seen in chapter five, argues that Javanese Islam is in fact Sufism, which is mystical Islam but most importantly truly Islam. During its expansion in Java it has assimilated, i.e. Islamised, pre-Islamic cultural and religious practices. As a result, the Javanese worldview is thoroughly Islamic and thus its key religious rituals such as the *slametan* as well.

Woodward makes his case on the basis of three points: the etymology of the term *slametan*, which is Islamic in origin; the widespread presence of communal meals in some way resembling the *slametan* throughout the Islamic world; the interpretation of the *slametan* in mystical Islamic, Sufi terms. It is the last point that deserves our attention here. Woodward argues that each separate element of the *slametan* can be given a Sufi interpretation. A case in point is the *tumpeng* or the rice cones commonly served at the *slametan* meal. Although these cones have a Hindu, Buddhist or even animist origin, they should actually be understood as expressing Sufi cosmology, Woodward argues. He points out that in *Quranic* cosmology prayers and supplications move upwards, while divine blessing moves downwards. This cosmology is expressed in Sufi theories of the descent and ascent of the perfect man, and in the spatial orientation of prayer. The *slametan*, Woodward claims, replicates (i.e. expresses) these beliefs, as the cones channel prayers and supplication upward, while the obtained blessing enters the top of the cones and from there spreads over all the community. On this basis Woodward concludes:

> "*Slametan* food, therefore, defines a local mode of the Islamic cosmos and is among the means through which blessing is attained and distributed." (Woodward 2011: 125)

Woodward's explanation of the *ujub* part of the *slametan* ritual is quite similar: even though the *ujub* might not be manifestly drawn from Arabic textual sources, it is certainly "motivated by Islamic religious concerns" (ibid.: 128). What does this imply? Firstly, Woodward interprets the host's apologies for his lack of eloquence and the inadequacy of the offered food as instances of Islamic humility. Therefore, the Islamic value of humility is expressed in the *ujub*. Secondly, again according to Woodward, holding a *slametan* is actually a re-contextualisation or a mirroring of a story from the *Hadith* (ibid.: 128). As Woodward recounts this story,

the Prophet Muhammad is invited to a meal and then officiates at it, by dividing the food amongst those present and having the left-over food sent as a present to those afflicted with hunger (ibid.: 114). Woodward points out that the performative structure of the *slametan* parallels the narrative structure of the text: a man invites a group of people, including a religious leader, to his home; the wife has prepared the food; the religious leader distributes the food to the assembly; the remainder is distributed to the poor. According to Woodward the textual notion of charity as found in this text, and in particular the distribution of food, has "informed" ritual practice of *slametan*. In other words, the *slametan* expresses the Islamic virtue of charity. To Woodward, this ritual is thus indubitably an instance of an Islamicate cultural practice that is found all over the Islamic world. The Javanese perform this ritual because they believe it secures the blessing of Allah and the saints, and because they believe, that the distribution of the food to the poor is regarded as meritorious -similar or superior to the merits obtained from *zakat*. Finally, in Woodward's explanation, the goal of the *slametan* is a mystical one, viz. the establishment of "...the social condition of union of servant and lord, which is believed to be essential if individuals and the community are to be truly *slamet* (...) *Slamet* is, therefore, not the social equivalent of *fana*' (mystical union), but of *baqa*, the state of tranquillity to which the mystic returns" (ibid. 133; italics in original).

Whether Woodward's explanation is convincing or not, is not the issue here. What is relevant though, is that every element of the *slametan* is understood as the expression of Islamic religious ideas, sentiments and beliefs[82]. The structure of the *slametan* is explained as a replica, or expression of an Islamic textual source. After all, "... mystical interpretations of Islam have served as paradigms for devotionalism, social order, and social life ..." and therefore this "... in turn, suggests that contemporary

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[82] An interesting stance is that of Stuart Robson (1985) who takes the *slametan* ritual to be Islamic, as he considers the *donga* to be at the centre of the *slametan* ritual (ibid.: 638) and the ritual as belonging to the Islamic layer of Javanese cultural history (ibid.: 639). However, he also underscores the presence of non-Islamic elements, such as the placing of *sesajen* and burning incense that are of Hindu origin. He refers to the presence of such elements of different religious descent as the "complexity" of the slametan. It is this "complexity" that more orthodox Muslims reject (Ibid.:640). Could it be that Robson recognises some syncretism without using the term?

Javanese religion must be understood in light of fields of meaning established by the larger Muslim tradition"(ibid.: 113).

7.4.2.   The absence of Javanese descriptions of *slametan*

As must be obvious, the issue here is not which of the above descriptions is correct, but rather that each different understanding is predicated upon the same assumption: the *slametan* is the embodiment of religious beliefs or worldview. In the course of this dissertation I have argued that the crystallisation of 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' took place within a Christian theological framework. Moreover, Javanese religion was constructed as symmetrical, though inferior, to Christianity. Within this construct *slametan* was designated an analogous position as the Lord's Supper within Protestantism, or the Eucharist in Catholicism. *Slametan* was identified as the core ritual of Javanese religion, as evidence that the Javanese were also yearning for redemption, and as an indication of the level to which they were misguided. The only thing that has changed in contemporary descriptions of the *slametan* is that this explicitly theological framework has retreated into the background. Thus, the constraints within which syncretist Javanese Islam was conceived are still instanced in our current understanding of the *slametan*. The slametan understood in this way can be seen as a building block of the experiential entity that is syncretist 'Javanese Islam'.

These descriptions of *slametan* were generated by members of a culture whose configuration of learning is dominated by theoretical knowledge, or knowing-about. Understanding the *slametan* entails that we know what it is. Because of prevalent epistemological constraints this has led to a description in terms of expressions of religious beliefs. If Javanese culture is a culture whose configuration of learning is dominated by practical knowledge, then a Javanese understanding of the *slametan* would focus on the knowing-how-to. However, it is ironic that virtually all the descriptions and explanations of the Javanese *slametan* we have, are from the hands of anthropologists or social scientists whose understanding is aligned to that of the missionaries. These accounts, then, are not the reflections of Javanese themselves, but only of the way scholars have made sense of Javanese traditions. Clearly, these anthropologists have had con-

versations with their informants on the topic of *slametan*, but let's not forget who asks the questions and to whom the answers need to make sense in order to count as intelligible. Given this basic fact, it is not surprising that it is difficult to find in these accounts the actual thoughts of a Javanese on the very subject of *slametan*.

If there is one scientific constraint we would expect an anthropological or ethnographic account on the *slametan* to meet, then at least that it dovetails with the way the Javanese themselves reflect upon it. We would expect to find such Javanese reflections on the *slametan* in the way they themselves describe this ritual. However, when from time to time a Javanese voice shimmers through, it actually raises doubts as to the veracity of the prevalent understanding of the *slametan*.

7.4.3.   The absence of worldviews in Javanese reflections on the *slametan*

One such instance we find in the mentioned research of Schweizer. As we saw, Schweizer claims that the motivation for holding a *slametan* is invoking heavenly blessings. This motivation in turn stems from a Javanese worldview with roots in Hindu-Buddhist beliefs. However, his research subjects themselves are not aware of any such motivations or underlying worldviews:

> "But this connotation [of heavenly blessing and a Javanese, Hindu-Buddhist worldview] of the slametan was not known to the villagers. They generally fell back on the conventional explanation that the slametan, 'continue the tradition of the elders'." (Schweizer 1989: 298)

Schweizer does not explain what it means for an explanation to be conventional and we are left to guess what the relevance of this statement is. Could "conventional" here mean ordinary, in the sense that it is a standard answer, a common place, an answer an anthropologist hears often to his questions as to why the Javanese perform this or that ritual? Indeed, we find similar explanations in other accounts on *slametan* (cf. Beatty 1999: 111). However, here "conventional" also seems to indicate a kind of superficiality. It is as if Schweizer cannot accept that to "con-

tinue the tradition of the elders” is a sufficient and satisfying reason for performing a *slametan* ritual. There must be, according to Schweizer, a deeper meaning to the ritual, one that is religious (1989: 299). It seems as though, in the eyes of Schweizer, performing the ritual because your elders did so, just doesn’t seem to make sense. It doesn’t say enough, if it says anything at all.

This lack of information, this seeming unwillingness to explain, when Javanese are asked about their religion and religious rituals is a recurring theme in anthropological studies. For example:

> “In spite of the bad reputation inflicted on them both by reformist Islam and by the coming of demystified society, supernatural beings still constitute a part of village life. They have been able to imprint their existence on the villagers' belief system, expressing their willingness to assist them. *The lack of public conversation about them makes it difficult for outsiders to appraise the present state of belief in supernatural beings in villagers' worldview.*” (Kim 1996: 155; italics mine)

I would like to point out two things. Firstly, Kim’s observation is not an isolated case. We come across remarks of this kind in a lot of the anthropological literature on Javanese rituals. Secondly, what is remarkable about this quote is not so much the “lack of public conversation” about “supernatural beings”, but rather Kim’s insistence that there is a Javanese worldview or belief system although the Javanese give no indication there even is such a worldview. After all, they themselves do not seem to be inclined to discuss it. A similar case is Beatty’s attempt to illicit an interpretation of the four coloured porridges at the centre of the *slametan*’s food offering. As he presses his informants for an explication of the meaning of the porridges, he notes that “... again, explicit interpretation is limited” (Beatty 1999: 41).

7.4.4.   Implicit interpretation and *kerata basa* as exegesis

In Beatty’s account this absence of explicit interpretation is an intricate part of the *slametan* ritual and allows for the multiple (even conflicting) interpretations that turn the *slametan* both into a syncretist ritual and into the hallmark of Javanese religious tolerance. How, then, should we understand this absence of explicit interpretation? It means that the Java-

nese (or minimally Beatty's informants) do not explicitly state what certain elements in the *slametan* mean or symbolise. Now, we have two possible conclusions to draw from this. Firstly, these elements, and perhaps the *slametan* as a whole as well, do not really mean anything. They do not express religious worldviews nor spiritual beliefs. Consequently, making sense of the *slametan* does not entail laying bare underlying beliefs or meanings -since there aren't any. Secondly, these elements and the *slametan* do have meaning, it just needs to be uncovered, that is interpreted. This, however, is not a straightforward affair (then we would have explicit interpretation), but rather complex and strenuous. By means of a discussion of the second option, I want to add plausibility to the first.

Beatty lists *kerata basa* (besides numerology) as the method *par excellence* by which the Javanese execute interpretations -he calls it exegesis. Anyone familiar with scholarly literature on Javanese religion has comes across this practice at least a couple of times. One can even find early hints at it in the missionary accounts. Usually *kerata basa* is explained as wordplay or association of words. Bernard Arps describes it as chopping up words in different parts which are given separate meanings, so as to achieve an explanation of the original word (1992: 363-64; cf. Beatty 1999: 41-42). The achieved meanings can be quite alien to what one would expect. A case in point is an explanation of the Islamic term *Shahada* provided by the protagonist of the *Suluk Gatoloco*. In his "esoteric interpretation" he reads "sah" as *pisah* (separated) and "dat" as *adat*. Consequently, the "*shahadat*" comes to mean "separate from tradition", something quite different from the original gloss "evidence", or more particularly, 'evidence of being Muslim' (Anderson 1982: 40 fn. 150)[83]. While to some scholars this technique appears quite random, often arbitrary, even nonsensical, to others it hints at a deeper order, a hidden reality or inner harmonies. However, if we take it as a form of exegesis, i.e. as a critical explanation or interpretation of a text, scriptural or oral, that has to withstand logical scrutiny, then I think it is obvious we would be in a hard place to defend such a position. Therefore, I would propose that instead of looking at the *outcome* -i.e. the meaning and possible interpretation *kerata basa* undeniably delivers- we look at the *act* of *kerata basa*.

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[83] For other examples of *kerata basa* see e.g. Anderson 1981: 128 fn. 34, Mulder 2005 [1994]: 164.

After all, it seems that the activity of *kerata basa* itself is at least as important, if not more important, than its actual outcome. In his discussion of public readings of the *Lontar Yusup* in Banyuwangi, Arps shows how the discussion of the text is an important, even integral, part of the reading (1992: 361 ff.). Such discussions are a Javanese cultural phenomenon and they "... parallel debates (*bantah*) between learned people in shadow theatre and the 'deliberations of the *wali*' (*musawaratan para wali*) on theological matters, that are recounted in several literary works" (ibid.: 362-63; italics in original). Based on Arps's analysis I would propose that the process of discussion, the actual discussing, is at least as important, probably even more important, than the outcome of the discussion. Firstly, Arps observes how during these discussions the listeners not only follow the arguments but also derive pleasure from the discussions qua discussions. Secondly, the discussions seem not to be about the text in its entirety, nor about longer stretches of the text, but rather about specific elements such as words or images. Moreover, the discussions often digress away from the text to salient themes of Javanese cultural knowledge (*kawruh kejawen*). Lastly, establishing the meaning of the text ("arriving at the intentions of the ancestors") is subordinated to achieving consensus. This last point implies that discussions about the 'true meaning' of the text are avoided, since different strongly held opinions can result in disharmony (ibid.: 365)[84]. Even though the paragraph above deals with discussions of a particular text, the discussions sur-

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[84] Arps indicates that the meaning of the *Lontar Yusup* is important to both performers and listeners. Despite the fact that the chatting of the audience at times drowns the recitation, that mistakes in the reading result in gibberish, that the archaic wording makes the text generally obscure, still the recitation of the text is not mere ritual, but has a significance transcending the literature. The story's protagonist, Yusup, is an exemplary man because he remains virtuous. Ideal interpretation involves a link to reality either pertaining to the identity of the personages, a toponym, or sometimes the historical information conveyed (Arps 1992: 365). The application of the story to concrete social situations indicates the relevance of interpretation and meaning (ibid.: 378-79). However, some of Arps' observations seem to indicate that the matter of meaning might be subordinated to other concerns. "What counts artistically in reading sessions, then, is that the *Lontar Yusup* is made available for an enjoyment and possibly interpretation. Even more important is that it is voiced in such a way as to enable the ritual success of the session. There is thus neither the urge, nor indeed the necessity, to comprehend the text completely in all its details" (ibid.: 383). Furthermore, the reciters of *Lontar Yusup* claim they do not understand the language of the text, since it is Kawi. However, they still talk about the meaning and intention of the work in relation *to the way* it is recited (proper vs. improper "calling" of the text) and they talk about "perceiving the story within" (ibid.: 383-84).

rounding or following the *slametan* in Beatty's descriptions follow the same pattern. Here too, it appears that the discussion as an activity in itself seems to be more important than the actual meanings or interpretations it produces. Here too, harmony or consensus comes before achieving a truthful explanation. Moreover, in both instances *kerata basa* is applied.

7.4.5.   Meaning versus praxis

What then should we make of the 'implicit interpretation' Beatty hints at -as opposed to the explicit ones that are absent? Who is to say that the ritual is the embodiment of differing doctrines and meanings (i.e. beliefs)? If the anthropologist is met with reluctance to offer explicit interpretations, then who will say what the *slametan* means? Who, but the anthropologist? And why should we press for an understanding of the *slametan* in terms of an embodiment of beliefs and meaning, if the Javanese actors themselves do not seem to corroborate such a stance?

It is perhaps tempting to dismiss this reluctance to speak about supernatural beings and religious beliefs as either a shyness particular to the Javanese, or as fear for speaking up about such a sensitive matter -e.g. for fear of creating religious controversy or perhaps of risking reprisals. This strategy has two results. On the one hand, of course, we have 'saved' the prevalent explanation of the *slametan* in terms of underlying meaning, beliefs or worldview. On the other hand, there is also a price to pay. Firstly, *kerata basa* becomes a 'watered-down' version of exegesis as we know it in the West, by shifting the focus from the performance of interpretation (how) to its interpretative outcome (what). After all, it is difficult to insist that the practice of *kerata basa* displays the same critical stance and logical necessity we know from scrutinising Biblical texts. Secondly, we 'explain away' the muteness and reported 'nonsensicality' present in Javanese answers to the anthropologist's questions of meaning. Could it not be that this recurrent pattern points to something epistemologically relevant? Could it not be that this reluctance is an indication that the questions gauging the meaning of the *slametan* ritual are somehow 'off the mark'? Perhaps it just doesn't make sense to probe

what underlying beliefs or worldviews motivate the *slametan* ritual. Consider the following observation by Beatty:

> "Most of the mystics reject the notion of a personal afterlife, yet
> like everyone else they take part in rituals directed, ostensibly, to
> the ancestors. Pak D., who told me bluntly that 'death is the end of
> the story', gave a feast at which he 'sent prayers to the departed'."
> (Beatty 1999: 173)

As Beatty stresses, this is not an instance that stands on its own, but rather something that happens on a regular basis: despite recurrent denial that there is a personal afterlife, people still engage in *slametan* rituals to illicit the "active intervention of the dead in the world of the living" (ibid.: 174). This kind of reasoning -or rather the absence of a certain kind or reasoning- seems to be structural, implying that the belief in an afterlife, or in supernatural beings for that matter, seems not to be the necessary condition for upholding a tradition such as the *slametan*. Consequently, if the performance of the *slametan* ritual is not predicated upon ancestor worship, animism or what-not, how then can these rituals be the expression of one or more of these worldviews? I propose to consider the possibility that they are not and that we instead approach the phenomenon of *slametan* as a practice.

7.4.6.   *Slametan* as a practice

One of the merits of Beatty's account of the *slametan* is his constant focus on the actual performance of this ritual (1999). It is the practice itself he credits with bringing about social harmony and mutual tolerance. It is tempting to speculate that this ritual somehow brings about a skill, that enhances one's capacity for social harmony. However, the absence of actual alternative, Javanese descriptions, withholds us from further probing this avenue.

We do have some snippets from the missionary accounts that illustrate how Javanese have approached the Lord's Supper. These seem, at first sight, to corroborate the idea that practice comes first. Hoezoo, a contemporary and fellow missionary of Poensen and Harthoorn, made the following observation of how Javanese Christians treated two key elements of the Christian religion: the Our Father and the Lord's Supper.

They did not understand it as the articles of faith, as a prayer to God, or as an expression of faith, but as a *ngelmu*:

> "That the Our Father is being prayed or rather uttered, *without bothering about content and meaning*, is alas! often enough to be observed. Even the articles of faith (...) serve, instead of the old magic spells, to charm snakes or ward off evil spirits. How often is something read without taking the effort of asking for the sense and meaning of it, ..." (Hoezoo 1863: 177; italics mine)[85]

Poensen too, laments the absence of thoughtfulness in the execution of the *slametan* as well as a general neglect of the essence and the noble, solemn character of a true sacrifice (1866: 44). Furthermore, he contrast this negligence of the meaning of rituals with the Javanese preoccupation with form. Could this be an indication that the Javanese are more concerned with the 'how-to' than with the 'what-is-it'?

Perhaps we should consider in the same light the recurring reports by Hoezoo and other missionaries about the preoccupation with the actual performance of a ritual being matched with a disinterest and ignorance about the religious belief that underlies it. In their eyes, the Javanese Christians (or the Javanese Muslims for that matter) did not understand their Christian teachings. That they had a soul, that salvation in the hereafter is to be earned in this life, that Jesus had died on the cross for our sins, etc.: all this was both incomprehensible and utterly unimportant to the Javanese. What did matter was ritual and its correct execution:

> "When people noticed, that I had slightly changed the regular religious Sunday worship [i.e. the Lord's Supper] compared to what had been customary, I heard mumbling about it, and even talk about a request to follow the old custom in it. And I could mention other instances that prove that many are far from acknowledging the missionary in his true relation to the congregation, but

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[85] My translation of: "Dat het Onze Vader wordt gebeden of liever uitgesproken, zonder dat men zich bekommert om inhoud en beteekenis, is helaas! dikwijls genoeg op te merken. Zelfs moeten de geloofsartikelen of eenig ander formulier soms dienen, in plaats van de oude tooverspreuken, om slangen te bezweren of booze geesten te verdrijven. Hoe dikwijls wordt er ook gelezen zonder verstand, terwijl men zich de moeite niet geeft, om naar zin en bedoeling te vragen, ..."

rather see him as its *loerah*, who first of all has to look after the
correct observance of its institutions." (Hoezoo 1863: 178)[86]

Strikingly, the way the Javanese Christians regarded the Protestant minis-
ters is identical to the way they looked upon the *modin*. Brumund notes in
his work regarding the evangelisation of Java, that the Javanese villagers
regard the *modin* as the one that is being paid to take care of religious
matters. He has to take care of praying, reading the Qur'an and going to
the *mesjid*, so they themselves need not to worry about these things
(Brumund and Brumund 1854: 70). The *modin* then is a ritual specialist.
Taken together, these observations seem to illustrate the Javanese stance
towards ritual, including the *slametan*: they see it as praxis pure and sim-
ple, and not as the expression of a belief. Their concern is with the cor-
rect execution of it and not with its meaning. If this stance indicates any-
thing at all, then at least an inclination to performative knowledge (how-
to) rather than to theoretical knowledge (what-is).

7.5.   Instead of a conclusion

We started this chapter with the suggestion that syncretist Javanese Islam
is an experiential entity. This implies that it is an entity in the Western
experience of but not an actual entity in Javanese culture. A first indica-
tion that this is the case can be found in the genealogy of 'Javanese
Islam' and 'Javanism' which clearly shows the crystallisation over time of
the *Gestalt*, the construct that is Javanese religion. Subsequently, we have
reiterated the observation that Christian theology has constrained the
West's descriptions and experience of certain aspects of Javanese culture.
The result is a conception of Javanese religion symmetrical to Semitic
religions.

As an experiential entity syncretist 'Javanese Islam' or 'Javanism' helped
generations of Westerners to come to terms with Javanese cultural real-

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[86] My translation of: "Toen men had opgemerkt, dat ik de gewone godsdienstoefeningen des
zondags eenigszins anders inrigtte, dan vroeger gebruikelijk was, hoorde ik daarover mompe-
len, en zelfs spreken van een verzoek, om daarin de oude gewoonte te volgen. En zoo zou ik
nog andere dingen kunnen noemen, evenzeer ten bewijze, dat velen wel verre van den zende-
ling in ware verhouding tot de gemeente te erkennen, hem veelmeer beschouwen als haar loe-
rah, die in de eerste plaats voor de getrouwe naleving harer instellingen te zorgen heeft."

ity. If we dismiss this entity as non-existing, then a logical question en-
sues: what is the alternative?

At this point I have brought in Balagangadhara's hypothesis on cultures
as configurations of learning. I use Balagangadhara's suggestion that
Asian culture is a configuration of learning where performative knowl-
edge is dominant as a heuristic. In other words, I scrutinise the available
sources for traces that hint at 'practical knowledge'.

Ideally, this heuristic would help us generate alternative descriptions of
agama and of *slametan* and *ngelmu*. On the basis of such alternative de-
scriptions we could proceed to a better understanding of Javanese cul-
tural reality. *Slametan* has been discussed in this chapter, and *ngelmu* will be
in the following. However, since there is a virtually complete lack of de-
scriptions of *slametan* by Javanese themselves, it is impossible at this stage
to generate true alternative descriptions[87]. For the time being, therefore,
we can do no more than scrutinise the way *slametan* has been conceived.
The analysis in this chapter shows that the *slametan* is not motivated by
religious beliefs, nor is it an expression or embodiment of religious be-
liefs. I have argued this on two points. Firstly, Javanese analysis, interpre-
tation, and explanation of *slametan*, such as *kerata basa*, does not offer
conclusive proof that the *slametan* is motivated by beliefs, nor that they
are expressions of belief. It seems that the performance of such explain-
ing is more important, or minimally as important, as its result, viz. the
explanation. Therefore, the act of 'explaining' the ritual, becomes per-
formance as well. Secondly, Javanese testimonies contradict that their
motivation for holding a *slametan* is located in religious beliefs. In fact, it
seems that the correct execution of any ritual (including the *slametan*) is
of much greater importance than its (purported) meaning. In the follow-
ing chapter I will discuss *ngelmu* as an instance of practical knowledge.

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[87] Prof. Arps has pointed out to me that the *Serat Centhini* contains many references to *slametan*.
This famous compilation of Javanese tales and teachings was composed in 1814 and is attrib-
uted to Susuhunan Pakubuwono V of Surakarta. I have not yet been able to scrutinise this
and/or other Javanese texts for Javanese descriptions of and reflections on the *slametan*. Such
an enterprise might provide both a test case for the suggestions put forward above and might
further help generating an alternative understanding of the ritual.