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Rethinking Javanese Islam. Towards new descriptions of Javanese traditions

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8. A new avenue? *Ngelmu* and agama

In the previous chapter I have drawn attention to how the current descriptions of the *slametan* turn it into the expression of a worldview, or certain religious beliefs. I have argued that we have sufficient reasons to doubt the accuracy of such an understanding. One of my points was that the Javanese, by avoiding any motivation in terms of doctrines or beliefs, seem to understand the *slametan* tradition as praxis pure and simple. Drawing upon the hypothesis of cultures as configurations of learning processes, we could describe this situation as follows. Descriptions of the *slametan* generated within Western culture focus on the ‘what’ of *slametan*. Because of a certain set of constraints, these descriptions turn the *slametan* into a ritual symmetrical to the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist. Indications of this are the central role it has in the construct that is ‘Javanese Islam’ and the way it is rendered intelligible as an embodiment or expression of certain religious beliefs. Alternatively, a description of a ritual such as the *slametan* generated within an Asian, *in casu* Javanese, culture would focus on the ‘how’ of the *slametan*. Unfortunately, there are very few descriptions of *slametan* by the practitioners themselves. One important step towards future research therefore would be to generate such descriptions. I have suggested to use the hypothesis on configurations of learning as a heuristic. The remainder of this chapter ties in with this suggestion, as I will attempt to render some fragments of an alternative description of *ngelmu*.

8.1. Javanese *Ngelmu*: religious belief or practical knowledge?

In the following paragraphs I will attempt to sketch an alternative conceptualisation of *ngelmu*. For this I will draw mostly on one particular Javanese text, *Serat Wedhatama*. Later on, I will add observations and ‘Javanese descriptions’ drawn from other sources such as missionary accounts and literary texts that have contributed to the construction of syncretist ‘Javanese Islam’ and ‘Javanism’. Before that, I will show how

ngelmu is portrayed and described in the accounts on religion in Java. I will contrast this with the way the Javanese themselves seem to talk about and use this *ngelmu* in the mentioned sources. As we saw, in the accounts of the missionaries Poensen, Harthoorn and Hoezoo, *ngelmu* was described as a kind of a doctrine or a belief. This has been the preferred understanding of *ngelmu* ever since. In the following paragraphs, however, I will argue that there are sufficient reasons to conceptualise *ngelmu* as a specific kind of knowledge, viz. a practical knowledge⁸⁸.

A treatment of the discussion of whether or not *ngelmu* is an Islamic concept would be too much of a digression here. Suffice to note that *ngelmu* is the Javanised version of the Arabic loanword *ilm*, which means science, knowledge, doctrine. A scholar like Woodward might argue that the concept is deeply and essentially Islamic and is understood by the Javanese in this fashion (2011: 77-79). There are however, also indications that *ngelmu* has a particular Javanese meaning. One of these indications is how, in certain instances of Javanese literature⁸⁹, *ngelmu* seems to be used interchangeably with the Javanese term *kawruh*. This truly Javanese term also refers to knowledge, usually knowledge of a mystical nature. Unfortunately, as far as I have been able to establish, little to no research has been performed regarding Javanese conceptions of knowledge. Therefore, I will take this seeming convergence of *ngelmu* and *kawruh* at face value, i.e. as an indication that at least in certain instances *ngelmu* has a specific, Javanese meaning. A second indication is the way *ngelmu* has been used by the Javanese both in day-to-day situations and in certain types of Javanese literature. In the following paragraphs, I will argue that, in these contexts, *ngelmu* is used as meaning practical knowledge. Before that, we need to have a look at the more common understanding of *ngelmu* in terms of belief.

⁸⁸ My suggestion here does not preclude other possible meanings of the word *ngelmu*. For the purpose of my argument, however, I will focus on one possible meaning solely.

⁸⁹ Examples are e.g. found in Serat Wedhatama (Robson 1990), Serat Dermagandhul (Drewes 1966). Interestingly, Patty (1986) contains an extensive list of different *aliran kebatiman* sects. Numerous of these have the term *kawruh* in their name, as a reference to the knowledge they dissipate.

Ngelmu as religious belief, mystical doctrine and magic

When the Protestant missionaries came across the phenomenon of *ngelmu*, they identified it as the religious beliefs of the Javanese. It helped them to make sense of the Javanese religious landscape. However, *ngelmu* was not understood as just a religious belief, but as a false religious belief. Localising the false beliefs of the Javanese was a point of departure for the conversion efforts of the missionaries. Their initial hope was that by showing the falsity of *ngelmu* they could bring the Javanese to the true faith of Protestant Christianity. As we saw, things turned out to be not that simple.

Today *ngelmu* seems to be understood as either magical or as mystical knowledge. Both stances have their roots in the genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism'. In the first instance, *ngelmu* is often equated with magic. Already in the accounts of the missionaries we come across this connotation, making it suspect from the outset. In this context *ngelmu* is the stock-in-trade of the (not so Islamic?) *kyai* and *dukun*. The missionary accounts tell numerous stories about travelling *kyai* who had gathered an array of *ngelmu* and would for a small retribution (money, food) put their *ngelmu* to work for ordinary Javanese villagers (cf. Hefner 1985: 189-96). There are *ngelmu* for protection against illness and spirits, others to become invulnerable, or to guarantee prosperity, etc. (e.g. Hoekema 1997: 132, 136, 142). Criminals too would secure themselves of the protection and benefits of such *ngelmu* (Schulte Nordholt and Till: 1999: 51). Interestingly, a *dukun bayi* (midwife) also possesses *ngelmu* although one could argue just how magical instead of plain practical her knowledge is. Even in more recent times the *dukun* and his/her *ngelmu* are still very much part of the Javanese cultural landscape. John Pemberton notes the application of *ngelmu* in wedding preparations, and the popularity of night vigils so as to acquire the *ngelmu* of invulnerability (Pemberton 1994: 210, 272-74). Steve Ferzacca describes the still potent role of the *dukun* in the late Suharto era despite the advent of modernity (2010: 29-30; cf. Woodward 2011: 69-111).

In the second instance, *ngelmu* is usually conceived of as esoteric knowledge (e.g. Anderson 1981: 112; Guinness 2009: 124-25; Hefner 2011: 77). In this context *ngelmu* is understood as an esoteric doctrine, something only the true initiated can understand. This is the context of the mysti-

cism of the *tarekat* (Sufi order) and the *aliran kebatinan* (mystical sect). As we saw, such groups are centred around a teacher who has mastered one (or several) *ngelmu* and has devised a way to pass on this *ngelmu*. For example, it has been argued for example that one of Wali Sanga, Sunan Gunung Jati, might have learned his *ngelmu* from the *tarekat* Kubrawiyya (Van Bruinessen 1994a: 312). *Ngelmu* is also taught within the *aliran kebatinan/kepercayaan* (Patty 1986: 145; Mulder 2005 [1998]: 53). Whether this mystical knowledge is truly Islamic or essentially Javanese is a matter of debate, which is out of the scope of our present discussion. However, such discussions tend to turn these *ngelmu* into pieces of religious belief. Consider, for example, how Zoetmulder and Woodward treat *ngelmu kesempuran* (*ngelmu* of the perfect man) in terms of doctrine and even theory (Zoetmulder 1935: 339-53, Woodward 1989: 177-84). In such instances, discussing the nature of a *ngelmu* -is it purely Islamic or not, is it Sufism or not, is it heretical Islam or not, is it actually Javanese, etc.- is more often than not executed on the premiss that these *ngelmu* are doctrines that can (or cannot) be traced back to a textual source. Subsequently, based on the presence or absence of such a source it is argued that this particular piece of esoteric knowledge in question is Islamic, Javanese, or both.

In the following paragraphs I will contrast this understanding of *ngelmu* as a belief, doctrine, or even theory, with an interpretation of *ngelmu* in terms of practical knowledge. The former interpretation dovetails with the 'orientalist' conception of 'Javanese Islam', and of the *slametan* as its central ritual which in turn expresses the Javanese Islamic world view. The Javanese belief system, or at least a part of it, is thought to be captured in these esoteric, mystical doctrines, viz. in *ngelmu*. The alternative description is guided by the heuristic drawn from the hypothesis on configurations of learning: if Javanese culture is an Asian culture, and if such a culture is a configuration of learning in which performative knowledge is dominant, then we should find expressions of that in the way the Javanese themselves reflect on their own traditions. As we will see, the *Serat Wedhatama* contains such reflections. The result of my query is at best a partial alternative description of *ngelmu*. I do not claim it is conclusive. However, taken together with the characterisation of *agama* as tradition and the suggestion that *slametan* is pure practice, I hope to show at least the epistemological productivity of this approach.

8.2. Javanese didactic writings

In this chapter I will focus on a particular genre of Javanese literature, viz. that of moralistic and didactic writings. Javanese literature knows of different kinds of this genre. Well known are the *suluk* and *primbon*. Both deal "... with Muslim mysticism tinged with pre-Muslim Javanese religious speculation" (Uhlenbeck 1964: 123). While the *suluk* is a song and has a coherent structure, the *primbon* is most often a collection of notes on diverging topics. The first is in *tembang* metre, the second is in prose. While the *primbon* can (but must not) have a mystical element, a *suluk* always has a mystical dimension. Both have been studied intensively. Such studies, developed in the wake of Snouck Hurgronje, have contributed greatly to the current understanding and conceptualisation of 'Javanese Islam', in both its syncretist and assimilated variant⁹⁰. An example from one end of the spectrum is a 16th century *primbon* attributed to Sunan Bonang, one of the Wali Sangga. Both Hendrik Kraemer (1921) and Gerardus J.W. Drewes (1954) regard this *primbon* as an instance of orthodox Islamic mysticism. This is argued on the presence of many quotations drawn from Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), the great Muslim thinker who is credited for having synthesised Islamic orthodoxy with Sufi mysticism (Kraemer 1921: 10). At the other end of the spectrum we may find such works as the already mentioned *Suluk Gatoloco*. Though no less mystical and esoteric, it is considered highly critical of Islam and it is in no sense orthodox (e.g. Anderson 1981: 110; Ricklefs 2007: 186, 191-95). Another excellent example is Zoetmulder's study (1935) into monistic, i.e. leaning to Islamic orthodoxy, and pantheistic, i.e. leaning to heresy and more 'Javanese', instances of *suluk* literature.

The kind of didactic text I will be focussing on below, is the *pinulang* (or *pitutur*). This genre of didactic poems is different from both the *primbon* and *suluk* in that the author is giving advice and admonitions to his readers. Usually, an older person is divulging knowledge to youngsters (Robson 1990: 4). A *pinulang* is therefore an instruction, a teaching, or a lesson. Most *pinulang* are concerned with: "... teaching values and standards of behavior and, in that sense, can be considered outlines of proper moral conduct in the Javanese way of life." (Atmosaputro and Hatch

⁹⁰ For a brief overview of discussions of *primbon* and *suluk*, and other moralistic and didactic writing, see e.g. Uhlenbeck (1964: 123-25).

1972: 157) Despite its long heritage -the oldest known *pivulang*, the *Sutusasana* (Instruction for sons), was written ca. 1465 by Mpu Tanakung (Robson 1990: 4)- most of the *pivulang* now available were composed after the middle of the eighteenth century. Well-known examples include *Sevaka* (Wilkens 1851); *Nitisastra*, *Niti Sruti*, *Niti Praja*, *Wulang rèh*, *Wulang Sunu*, *Wulang Estri* by Pakubuwana IV, Susuhunan of Surakarta (r. 1788-1820); and *Serat Sanasunu* by Yasadipura II, court poet of Surakarta until 1844.

8.3. *Ngelmu* as depicted in the *Serat Wedhatama*

Here I will discuss some aspects of the *Serat Wedhatama* attributed to prince Mangkunegara IV of Surakarta (1811-81, r. 1853-81) who is famous for being both an outstanding statesman and a remarkable poet (Robson 1999: 34-35). He was a prolific writer and amongst the many *serat pivulang* by his hand the *Serat Wedhatama* truly stands out. It is considered an exemplary *pivulang* as it, according to Atmosaputro and Hatch, stresses basic Javanese values, expresses a positive and energetic attitude toward life, and is often highly mystical in nature.

“The poem rapidly became very popular outside the court and even today many people still memorize it and chant it privately in their homes or publicly on religious and social occasions.” (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 157).

Despite its popularity, it is clear the teachings are not intended for all people, but only for a certain social group, viz. for the “... larger group of nobility of Central Java: members of the Kasunanan house of Surakarta, its junior partner the Mangkunagaran, the Sultanate of Yogyakarta and its offshoot the Pakualaman” (Robson 1990:4). That is, the nobility of Central Java who consider themselves the descendants of Senapati, the first king of Mataram.

Literally, *Wedhatama* can mean “exalted wisdom” or “highest wisdom”⁹¹. In what follows I will try to circumscribe this most exalted knowledge.

⁹¹ Prof. Wieringa has pointed out that both “exalted wisdom” and “highest wisdom” are approximate translations, and other “literary” translations, such as “excellent teachings” are also possible.

However, I will not offer a new translation nor a detailed philological discussion of the text. Today there are minimally three excellent translations available: the 1941 translation by the renowned ‘Javanicus’ P.J. Zoetmulder; the 1972 translation by Suranto Atmosaputro, a lecturer in Javanese language and culture in Surakarta, and Martin Hatch, scholar of Javanese performing arts; and the translation from 1990 by Stuart Robson, eminent Javanese linguist, whose translation has become the current standard scholars tend to refer to. Unless explicitly indicated, I will make use of the translation by Atmosaputro and Hatch. I will contrast it with the other two translations to discuss several key passages. The Javanese transcript is that by Robson. Following the heuristic as laid out above, my focus will be on the way knowledge is depicted. The choice for the *Serat Wedhatama* should be obvious: we are dealing with a didactic poem, meaning its intention is to disseminate knowledge and, more specifically, spiritual and moral knowledge. Furthermore, this text is described as a prime example of a *Javanese* didactic text. There is therefore a justified hope that we can find here a Javanese description of knowledge, or rather of *ngelmu*.

For the purpose of generating a ‘Javanese description’ of *ngelmu*, it suffices to know that the author (Mangkunagara IV) is teaching his pupils (sons) how to become proper Javanese noblemen, by showing them which examples to follow and not to follow. The end of the text deals with four specific practices that ultimately lead to the highest knowledge the text is named after. In the discussion below, I will gradually add more details. I will attempt to come to an approximation of a Javanese understanding of *ngelmu*, one that can serve as an alternative to the current one. I do so with help of five questions.

8.3.1. For whom is this *ngelmu* intended?

From the outset Mangkunagara IV makes clear that this knowledge is not intended for just anybody. After all, this knowledge pertains to the religion which belongs to the king (*agama ageming aji*, I.1). In other words this knowledge is befitting for Javanese noblemen, i.e. *priyayi*.

We need to make two reservations. Firstly, Mangkunagara points out that “real knowledge” is found in old and young men, of high and low class

(*Wrubanira mungguh sanyataning ngèlmu / Tan pasti nèng janma wreda / Tuwin muda sudra kaki*, I.11). This seems to indicate that the knowledge his pupils should strive for is not exclusive to their social group. However, his teachings are explicitly directed only at youngsters from a distinct social group. One way of tackling this seeming contradiction is to consider that *ngelmu* here means both the process of learning as well as the end-result. Consequently, I suggest that Mangkunagara is disclosing a way or process of learning specific for one social group. The end-result, i.e. “real knowledge”, however is attainable by each and every social group, in all probability by other processes. Secondly, there seems to be one group of people where this knowledge is not to be found: those who follow the way of the Prophet. Their constant preoccupation with ritual and with showing off their theological skills leads them away from “real knowledge”. We will return to this point that later on.

8.3.2. What is the result of this *ngelmu*?

The result of the *ngelmu* is spiritual and moral excellence. The moral dimension is apparent in what the students should and should not do, how they should and should not behave. For example: it is not befitting to grope for compliments; it is befitting to think before one speaks, etc. Rather, one should hide one’s feelings behind a pleasant expression, and be indifferent when called ignorant, etc. The spiritual dimension lies in the teaching of meditation or asceticism and the aim of equanimity. Only through mastering one’s urges, emotions, and desires will one be able to see the truth and achieve one’s goals.

Three comments. Firstly, asceticism or meditation is not a goal in itself, but rather a practice from which one will reap certain benefits⁹². On sev-

⁹² I would like to stress that I am not taking the characterisation of asceticism or meditation (i.e. *tapa*) as a kind of *ngelmu* in the *Serat Wedhatama* as the generally accepted Javanese understanding of it. Other sources, from different periods, might provide differing renditions of the term *tapa* (e.g. Drewes 1954). Ann Kumar’s analysis of the text *Sasana Sunu* by Yasadipura II from ca. 1819 features a discussion of the *tapa* in terms of penance through self-mortification (1997: 399-411, esp. 403-404). At face value her rendition of *tapa* seems to converge with my suggestions. However, it is impossible to learn from Kumar’s analysis whether Yasadipura II regards *tapa* as a kind of *ngelmu*, as Mangkunagara IV seems to do. Moreover, she does not offer a complete translation of the *Sasana Sunu*.

eral occasions Mangkunagara IV speaks of such benefits. For example Ratu Kidul's⁹³ intention is to ask Senapati for the benefits of his asceticism (II.5). One of these benefits is that by mastering this asceticism one will become able to achieve one's goals. Secondly, Mangkunagara IV speaks about Senapati as the highest example of *behaviour* for the Javanese. Therefore, the imparted knowledge shows one *how* to be a moral and spiritual Javanese person. This is to say, Mangkunagara IV is not so much saying *what* this behaviour is, but rather, *how* one needs to (and needs not to) behave in order to be a proper Javanese nobleman. Thirdly, it also seems to imply that there is a difference between what is and what is not suitable as *ngelmu* for a Javanese person.

8.3.3. What kind of *ngelmu* is disseminated?

It is the highest *ngelmu* that Mangkunagara IV disseminates. I will try to circumscribe the particular knowledge by summing up the different ways Mangkunagara IV characterises it.

Firstly, the knowledge imparted is not an ordinary kind of knowledge. It is translated differently in the three renditions I am using: "secret knowledge" (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 163), or "noble science" (Robson 1990: 21), or "exalted science" or "doctrine of life" (*levensleer*) (Zoetmulder 1941: 182) (*ngelmu lubung*, I.11). It is not clear to me what is meant by this knowledge being secret. It being exalted or noble, however, seems in line with the title of the text. Not being a philologist of Javanese language, then, I am not in a position to say which of these translations is the most apt. However, we can see a clear difference in translation of *ngelmu*: as knowledge on the one hand, and as science or doctrine on the other. As I hope to show in the following pages this difference in translation is also indicative of a difference in interpretation and understanding.

⁹³ Ratu Kidul is the mythological queen of the South-Sea to whom each Sultan of Yogyakarta is married in succession to Senapati. The annual *Labuban* at the beach of Parangkusumo is dedicated to Ratu Kidul and serves as a reaffirmation of this original union of Ratu Kidul with the Yogyakarta court.

Secondly, this knowledge pertains to the land of Java. This means that this knowledge is indigenous to Java. Moreover, it is characterised as the religion of the king (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 163), or the tradition adhered to by the king (Robson 1990:21; Zoetmulder 1941: 182) (*agama ageming aji*, I.1). It is unambiguously set apart from Islam, which is not considered Javanese knowledge (cf. III.6-7)⁹⁴. Moreover, Islam is considered to be the way of a specific social group, viz. the *kaum* (the pious, professional religious community), and not of the *priyayi*, the social group Mangkunagara IV and his pupils belong to.

Thirdly, Mangkunagara IV characterises this knowledge as true knowledge: truly giving gladness to the heart. (*Mangkono ngèlmu kang nyata / san-yatané mung wèh reseping ati*, I.5). Thus, it seems this knowledge enables one to attain happiness. Happiness is circumscribed as remaining equanimous, for the happy person does not grope for compliments, is not pretentious, not confrontational, does not mind insult, but rather is modest and succinct in speech (I.5-6). The happy man is connected with that core of good conduct which is part of a holy religion (*Gon-anggon agama suci*, I.7). This characterisation ties in with the spiritual and moral dimension pointed out above.

Fourthly, this knowledge is distinct from magic (*ngèlmu-karang*, I.9). Mangkunagara IV warns his pupils for magic, which he says is only superficial. True knowledge, however, is achieved by asceticism which implies perseverance and diligence. It is interesting to note that magic is presented as a kind of *ngelmu*. It seems to imply that magic is but one kind of *ngelmu* amongst several.

Fifthly, as the text progresses, especially in Canto IV, the descriptions of the highest knowledge become increasingly unintelligible. I suggest this has to do with the nature of this knowledge. It is a knowledge that is achieved through praxis, it is knowledge that is experiential by nature. That is to say one knows, only when one has experienced it. One cannot know or understand by merely reading the text of *Wedbatama*, one has to

⁹⁴ It is important to point out that the evaluation of Islam as reflected in the *Serat Wedbatama* can be regarded a product of its time. At other moments Islam may have been appreciated differently. However, my interest here is in the way Islam is set apart as a kind of knowledge from Javanese knowledge and not as a religion from another religion.

follow its directions, perform, practice, and experience. Only then one will know.

8.3.4. How is this *ngelmu* taught?

The way this knowledge is taught is by example. From the outset, Mangkunagara IV points out who is and who is not a good example, whose actions and behaviour one should and should not follow.

A proper example

The proper or good example is to be imitated, the bad or improper example is to be avoided. A proper example are the “wise men who have already done asceticism” (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 165) or “scholars who live an austere life” (Robson 1990: 25) (*martapi*, I.11). The example par excellence is Senapati, the founder of the Mataram dynasty: “... all young men should imitate the highest example of behavior for people in the land of Java -- that of the great man of Mataram, Panembahan Senapati.” (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 165, 167). Robson translates this slightly differently as: “And hence, young people, take as model an excellent rule of life appropriate to the people of Java: That of the great Man of Mataram, Panembahan Senapati.” (Robson 1990: 26-27). The difference is in “example of behavior” versus “rule of life” (*Nulada laku utama*, II.1). I would suggest it makes more sense that Mangkunagara IV advises his pupils to imitate Senapati’s *behaviour*, since, as will become more and more apparent, the kind of knowledge that is being taught seems to be practical knowledge. In this context, ‘taking as a model a rule of life’, seems to make little sense.

Why is Senapati such a good example? Firstly, Senapati always practised gentleness when meeting others, he practised asceticism, he constantly strived for the target of his will, for clearness of heart, he “sucked up the old, ripe way” (could this mean tradition?) so as to achieve clear insight into intentions, striving for calmness in his feelings, the serenity of virtuous thought, he disciplined himself in love for his fellow-man (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 167). Secondly, as result of Senapati’s pact or marriage with the Queen of the South Sea, Ratu Kidul, his off-

spring is able to quickly achieve what it wishes for, if they train or strive with their minds (*jèn ama sab mesu budi*, II.6). These are Senapati's merits and it befits his descendants to take these merits as their example (ibid.: 169).

An improper example

If Senapati is a good example for the nobility of Java, then what would not be a good example? For those who want to rule Java, the Prophet is not a proper example. Why? Because, "young men who indulge themselves in imitating the Prophet, the leader of the world, our lord messenger, always use this indulgence boastfully" (ibid.: 169). Even though they constantly practise Islamic rituals, they do not know its essence. In other words, they are absorbed in showing off. Mangkunagara IV admonishes his pupils not to be eager for compliments when imitating the way of the scholars of Islam. Therefore, the reason Mangkunagara IV rejects following the way of the Prophet, is that this way is contra-productive for suppressing one's emotions, for achieving calmness of mind, etc.

It is important to note that Mangkunagara IV advises not to follow the *way* of the scholars of Islam. Hence, he does not advise not to follow Islam, but rather not to be overzealous in it. His warning is not so much against imitating the example of the Prophet, as it is against *persistently* imitating it. For his pupils a little suffices, given the fact that they are Javanese (*rèhné ta sira Jawi / sathibik baé nus cukup*, II.10). In other words, for the Javanese there is a Javanese *way* to obtain the desired state, or true knowledge. And, as we have seen already, this way is exemplified by Senapati.

It is proper to stick to one's own tradition

Mangkunagara IV explains that when he was a young man, he himself knew a period of religious zeal (*abérag marang agama*, II.12), taking lessons from any passing *bajji*. During that period, he would worry greatly about the Last Judgement. However, being summoned by his master (him who gives food) every day, was like facing such a judgement on a daily basis. This made him question who was more important: Allah or the king

(Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 171; Robson 1990: 33; Zoetmulder 1941: 189)? Mangkunagara IV came to understand something essential:

“Gradually I realized that,
because I was a son of a *prijaji*,
if I wanted to be a *kaum*, that would be contemptible

or a *ketib* or *suragama*⁹⁵.
I am not a descendant of these people.
It is better if I stick
to the order of the necessities of life,
the way of veneration
of the traditions of my ancestors;
from the old times
up to now, ...”

(Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 171)

Here it is obvious that as a *prijayi*, Mangkunagara IV and his sons have their own traditions, including their own traditions of veneration and spirituality. Therefore, Mangkunagara IV sees Islam as just another avenue next to the Javanese avenue. Being Javanese and *prijayi*, it is proper to follow the Javanese way and not the way of the *kaum*. It does not imply that Mangkunagara IV is opposed to Islam -a little can't hurt and might even be beneficial- it is just not the way of the Javanese. Therefore the example to follow must be a Javanese example and cannot be a non-Javanese example. This, I would argue, indicates an essential part of the Javanese understanding of *agama*. It seems indeed to be understood as a tradition, i.e. as a *practice* handed down from generation to generation.

8.3.5. How is this *ngelmu* learned?

This *ngelmu* is learned, obtained, through practice. The *Serat Wedhatama* deals with ‘true knowledge’, which in turn is only possible if one has subdued one’s passions, and mastered one’s will and intentions. This is achieved by ‘striving with one’s mind’ (ibid.: 167) (*jèn amasab mesu budi*, II.6), ‘sharpening one’s mind’ (ibid.: 167, 171), or ‘applying oneself to

⁹⁵ Robson notes that the term *suragama* is not featured in any dictionary, he speculates that it refers to a specific group of servants, *in casu* armed clergy (Robson 1990: 52-53).

mental discipline' (Robson 1990: 29) (*Masab amamasuh budi*, II.17). Obviously, then, this kind of knowledge is not obtained through reading books or listening to sermons for example. Rather, it is obtained by praxis. This is why Mangkunagara IV urges his sons or students: "After you have received the revelation from God, be quick to become clear and able to *work* on spiritual knowledge, able to get knowledge of how to die -- the end of being" (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 165; italics mine). In Robson's translation this has become "Whoever obtains God's revelation soon shines at the *practice* of the science of insight" (1990: 25; italics mine). (*Sapantuk wahyuning Allah / Gya dumilah mangulah ngèlmu bangkit / Bangkit mikat rèh mangukut*, I.12.). This, I would suggest, is consistent with how Mangkunagara IV opens his *Serat Wedhatama* by announcing that he is happy to *train* children (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 163) (*akarena karenan mardi sivi*, I.1).

Mangkunagara IV actually stipulates how this *ngèlmu* is acquired:

"This knowledge
is achieved through practice,
the process is with "kas."
The meaning of "kas" is to strengthen
one's perseverance in suppressing evil passions."
(*ibid.*: 173)

The famous phrase "*ngèlmu iku / kalakoné kanthi laku*" (III.1) receives a different translation from Atmosaputro and Hatch on the one hand and Robson and Zoetmulder on the other. While the first translate the phrase as "This knowledge is achieved through practice", Robson translates this sentence as "knowledge goes together with practice" (1990: 35). Zoetmulder delivers a similar translation: "This wisdom of life is only meaningful when it is put into practice" (1941: 191)⁹⁶. In both Zoetmulder's and Robson's interpretation one has to put the acquired knowledge into practice. One puts it into practice by means of discipline, which in turn means overcoming selfish desires and cultivating peace of mind (Robson 1990: 15-16). In a way, Zoetmulder and Robson turn what I have been arguing so far upside-down. However if, as I have proposed, Mangkunagara IV is divulging practical knowledge, then it would seem

⁹⁶ My translation of: "De levenswijsheid (de ngèlmoe) heeft slechts zin, wanneer ze in praktijk gebracht wordt."

more appropriate that he advises a certain praxis through which one obtains this true knowledge. The praxis in question is that of asceticism and meditation (sharpening one's mind), thereby subduing one's passions so as to see clearly the core of one's being (cf. II.16).

8.3.6. *Ngelmu*: practical knowledge vs. theoretical knowledge

It is not within the scope of this dissertation to provide a theory on practical knowledge -or on knowledge in general for that matter. My goal here is much more modest: generating a partial alternative description of *agama*, *slametan*, and *ngelmu* on the basis of Javanese reflections on these phenomena. For this, I have been using Balagangadhara's hypothesis on cultures as learning configurations as a heuristic. That is, in these Javanese reflections I have been looking for possible instances of practical knowledge. With regard to the current topic of *ngelmu* it is useful to consider the generally accepted distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge. While the former can be, and usually is, conveyed verbally (oral or written) and is understood as such, the latter needs praxis, i.e. practice or experience, to become knowledge. In this case understanding is of an experiential nature. And, while in the first case the result is abstract knowledge, in the second one I would rather speak of a skill. I propose, then, that the knowledge discussed in *Serat Wedhatama* is a kind of practical knowledge. It is a praxis, i.e. something that must be done and experienced for it to be understood. Only through doing and practising, can one achieve this knowledge. The example of Senapati thus functions as a signpost indicating the direction to follow, while Mangkunagara IV's explanations are like a roadmap for the course that lays ahead. The exposition in the fourth Canto of *Serat Wedhatama* deals with the four kinds of worship that are portrayed as beacons on the avenue to reach 'true knowledge'.

In the translation by Atmosaputro and Hatch *ngelmu* is consistently depicted as practical knowledge, and consequently the objective of Mangkunagara IV is to train, rather than to teach (in the sense of lecture), his pupils. This is why he urges them to follow the example of Senapati: one has to diligently practice equanimity and patience, so as to become compassionate and forgiving (e.g. Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 173;

III.2-4). This focus on praxis is almost completely absent in both Robson's and Zoetmulder's translation. Praxis is merely the next step after having understood the abstract knowledge Mangkunagara is seemingly divulging (almost *ex cathedra*). In order to get my point across better, compare the different translations of:

Basa ngèlmu
Mupakaté lan panemu
Pasabé lan tapa
 (III.10-11)

In Robson's translation this becomes:

"But as for knowledge,
 Its acceptance is achieved by considered judgement,
 And is made effective through asceticism.
 (Robson 1990: 37)

Zoetmulder renders it as follows:

"As far as the *ngelmu* is concerned:
 one agrees with her by thinking her over;
 her efficacy she receives from the practice of asceticism"
 (Zoetmulder 1941: 193)⁹⁷

In Atmosaputro and Hatch's translation this is:

"Knowledge
 is thought
 embued [sic] with asceticism"
 (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 175)

Since I am not a philologist (let alone versed in Javanese) I will leave the discussion of correct translations to the specialists. I can only point out that in these particular verses two Western philologists understand *ngelmu* as a piece of theoretical or abstract knowledge. Only after accepting this knowledge does one put it into practice. I will leave open to what degree this makes sense. However, the Javanese person renders *ngelmu* explicitly as practical knowledge. After all, asceticism is something one practices or

⁹⁷ My translation of: "Wat de leer van de *ngèlmoe* betreft: men stemt er mee in door haar te overdenken; haar uitwerking echter heeft ze door het beoefenen van ascese."

does. In this interpretation, the highest *ngelmu* is itself an activity, viz. that of thinking imbued with asceticism. The workings of this “thought imbued with asceticism” are actually explained in Canto III. The passions are located in the body and, when let loose, cause great disturbances. The person who is calm, because he is “practicing the highest form of patience” (ibid.: 173) (*Sarwa sarèh saking mardhi martotama*, III.3), is not confused, but forgiving and loving. It is appropriate for a *priyayi* to imitate and follow all the instructions of such a person. The knights (*satriya*) of Java (in this context that is the ancestors of Mangkunagara IV and the example for the *priyayi*) practiced diligently three matters: remaining calm and not becoming regretful when losing something; readily accepting it, when being hurt by fellow-men; being open-hearted and humble, surrendered to God (*Bathara*, not Allah) (ibid.: 175).

8.3.7. Islam as practical knowledge?

As pointed out, the Javanese way is set in contradistinction to the way of Islam. However, Mangkunagara’s critique targets the practice of Islam by certain youngsters and not Islam’s doctrines. His problem is with the many young men that boast about their interpretations of the Koran (ibid.: 173) or their theological knowledge (Robson 1990: 37). They hurry to appear as wise men, but they are deceitful. Their reasoning is obscure. They reject their Javanese-ness and try for the knowledge of Mecca (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 173) (*Elok jawané dèn-mohi / Paksa langkah ngangkah mèt kawruh ing Mekah*, III.7). However, they do not know that the *rasa* (the core of the true feeling) they search for is stuck in the body. They are not really striving. Otherwise, they would see that there is no difference between here and there. These young fellows will not be able to attain the desired position in life, as they remain filled with passions. Summarising, in the eyes of Mangkunagara IV, the main difference between the Javanese knights of the old days and the (Muslim) youth⁹⁸ of today seems to be that while the former worked diligently at mastering their passions, the latter let those passions roam freely. The difference then is a difference in praxis, and not in doctrines.

⁹⁸ “Youth” here does not just mean Muslim youth, but more importantly refers to a youthfulness of mind, as in naïve and inexperienced. I thank prof. Wieringa for pointing this out.

The discussion of the four different kinds of worship (*sembah*) in Canto IV further substantiates my suggestion that Mangkunagara IV regards *ngelmu* as a kind of practical knowledge and that he treats Islam as analogous to it.

The first worship, that of the body (*raga*), is a ritual cleansing (*susuciné*) done with water, five times a day. Mangkunagara IV is referring here to the five daily ablutions of Islam, as he uses the terms *saréngat* to designate them. Robson in fact translates *susuciné* as ablutions (Robson 1990: 41), while Atmosaputro and Hatch prefer ritual cleansing (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 175), and Zoetmulder opts for cleansing (*reimiging*) (Zoetmulder 1941: 194). However, it is clear that Mangkunagara IV has a very specific understanding of these five daily ablutions. He regards them as only relevant for the apprentice: it is “the conduct of the noviciate” (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 175) (*Pakartiné wong amagang laku*, IV.2). *Saréngat*, Mangkunagara IV tells his pupils, can be a kind of practice (*laku*) if it is done regularly and diligently. The benefits of this practice are a refreshed and perfect body, and a calm, focused mind. Although it can be a practice (*laku*), it must be kept apart from spiritual practice (*laku batin*). After all, only through a higher form of worship (such as *laku batin*) is it possible to see God. While in the old days, things were correct and orderly from generation to generation and *saréngat* was not mixed with spiritual practice (*laku batin*), today this has become confused. Mangkunagara IV points at the zealous Muslims who use the *saréngat* to show off their brilliance and imagine to know the light of God. However, seeing God only is possible with higher forms of worship. Clearly then, *saréngat* is but one form of one of the four worships, which are described as cleansing. Its relevance is purely as a practice and very limited indeed.

The second worship, that of the mind or thought (*cipta*)⁹⁹, also becomes a practice (*laku*) if performed regularly. This practice is the possession of the king. The result is exact and accurate knowledge of providence (Zoetmulder 1941: 195; Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 177; Robson 1990: 43). The cleansing is not with water, but consists in steadily lessen-

⁹⁹ Robson and Zoetmulder translate this worship as respectively “worship of thought” (*cipta*) (Robson 1990: 39) and then as “worship of the heart” (*sembah kalbu*) (Robson 1990: 43; Zoetmulder 1941: 195). Atmosaputro and Hatch use “worship of the mind” in both cases.

ing the mind's desires. One starts this worship orderly, accurate and careful and perseveres steadfastly. The result is the experience of the opening of a greater world. After this experience one's acts are full of calmness, achieved by stillness, clarity, and watchfulness. Then one finds the justice of the All-Wise. Mangkunagara IV, however, admonishes his pupils not to give the will free reign. One must always be attentive to such matters which may cause this practice to fail.

The third worship, that of the soul or the spirit (*jīwa*), is a worship that is truly presented to the Great Invisible (God). It is the essence of practice (*laku*), the behaviour in the area of spiritual matters (*bangsaning batin*). The ritual cleansing is with watchfulness and attentiveness to eternity.

The fourth worship, is that of the essence (*rasa*), in which the core of being is felt. It is achieved by inner firmness. The higher power is only to be achieved if one is “*melok*”. With each consecutive stage of worship, Mangkunagara IV's explanations become more and more unintelligible. That is to say, they become unintelligible for the inexperienced. The fourth worship is an indisputable instance of this, as it is pointed out that one will understand what *melok* is only when all vacillation in the mind or heart (*kalbu*) has vanished.

Thus, Mangkunagara IV approaches Islam as a practical knowledge. Both his critique and his appreciation of Islam are in practical terms. This is evident from the way he explains how the five daily ablutions could be an instance of ‘practice’ (*laku*), but have to remain separate from spiritual practice (*laku batin*). This approach seems, at face value, similar to the way Javanese villagers treated the Lord's Supper.

8.4. Summary: *Ngelmu* as practical knowledge

In the previous paragraphs, I have argued that the *ngelmu* discussed in the *Serat Wedhatama* is a kind of practical knowledge. This seems to correspond with the way Javanese treat *ngelmu* as portrayed in the missionary reports. Despite the missionaries' understanding of it as Javanese religious beliefs, *ngelmu* also appears as a kind of practical knowledge. After all, *ngelmu* is something that needs to be performed, i.e. done, in order to obtain a certain goal or avoid a kind of mishap. As we have seen, there

are many kinds of *ngelmu*. There are those oriented at everyday problems such as resolving health issues, protection against theft, ensuring a speedy voyage. There are more spectacular *ngelmu*: for freeing oneself from ropes or chains, for preventing a gun or pistol from firing, or to block another *ngelmu* (Poensen 1864: 253-58). Then there are *ngelmu* of a more spiritual kind: those that promise wisdom and happiness. These come in different forms such as a formula or a riddle. For example: “What is better: to fear Allah or to dare to stand up to him?” or “Who is the father of Allah?” (Harthoorn 1860: 216; my translation). However, all *ngelmu* share at least two characteristics. Firstly, they are very practical and usually promise an observable result in this life. The reasoning behind a *ngelmu* seems to be: If you do this, then the result will be that. Secondly, it is the actual act of performing the *ngelmu* that makes it effective and not the belief in it. Therefore it is not surprising to find that to the Javanese the meaning of a *ngelmu* (or rather its *rapal*) is unimportant, and there is no need to explain it:

“... the Javanese whom I submitted the *rapal* of this *ngelmu* to, as well as the person from whom I had learned it, could not tell me what it meant. They could of course explain the pure Javanese words that it featured one by one, but neither could they explain the overall meaning nor the Arabic words. *However it does not matter to the Javanese. For him it is only required to know the words by heart. He firmly believes that the ngelmu will demonstrate its power, if he can just pronounce the words of the rapal.*” (Poensen 1864: 247-48; italics mine)¹⁰⁰

Although the Javanese in question believed in the effectiveness of a *ngelmu*, (religious) belief is not the prerequisite for its effectiveness. Clearly then, the ritual performance of a *ngelmu* is of a different order than the ritual of e.g. the Eucharist where believing that Jesus died for our sins is a necessary requisite for obtaining its benefits. Moreover, understanding the meaning of *ngelmu* seems to be utterly alien to the way the Javanese conceptualised it. Still, and this is telling, someone like

¹⁰⁰ My translation of: “... de Javanen, welken ik de rapal van deze Ngelmoe heb voorgelegd, zoowel als de persoon, van welken ik haar geleerd heb, konden mij niet zeggen, wat zij beteekende. De zuiver Javaansche woorden, die er in voorkomen, konden zij natuurlijk wel op zich verklaren, maar den algemeenen zin, zoowel als de arabische worden, niet. Trouwens dit doet er voor den Javaan ook niets toe. Bij hem is het maar vereischte, de woorden uit het hoofd te kennen. Wis en zeker gelooft hij, dat de Ngelmoe hare kracht zal betoonen, als hij de woorden van de rapal maar kan uitspreken.”

Harthoorn defines *ngelmu* as a false belief or false knowledge: the Javanese falsely believe they will obtain holiness through this kind of knowledge. As we saw, Harthoorn even claims that *ngelmu* is to the Javanese what the Gospel is to the Christians. Therefore, the missionaries conceived of *ngelmu* as symmetrical to Christian beliefs. However, the discussion of Mangkunagara IV's reflections on *ngelmu* has given us some concrete indications that there actually is no such symmetry: *ngelmu*, in the Javanese understanding of it, are instances of practical knowledge, not beliefs, doctrines or theories.

8.5. *Agama*: fragments of an alternative description

I will now return to the five expectations we deduced from the Javanese conceptualisation of *agama* as tradition in the previous chapter. Where possible, I will add observations regarding *slametan* and *ngelmu* as well. However, I need to repeat at the outset, that I am not trying to proffer an explanation of neither *agama*, *slametan* nor *ngelmu*. Nor am I trying to explain the relationship (if such relationships exist) between these three phenomena. Such an enterprise is too large and too ambitious for the confines of one dissertation. The objective then is to offer a partial alternative description of these three phenomena, an alternative to the ones that are featured in today's text book story on Javanese religion and culture. We will need to generate many more of such descriptions, before we can start the task of building an alternative understanding.

Firstly, we have pointed out that a tradition is upheld for tradition's sake. Therefore, in Javanese descriptions of *agama* we would expect them to motivate adherence to it on the basis of them being tradition. We find an example of this in canto II of the *Serat Wedathama* when Mangkunagara IV advises his pupils not to follow the way of the Prophet, but to stick to the Javanese way (II.8-14). He motivates this by calling the latter "... the way of veneration of the traditions of my ancestors..." (Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 171). Obviously then, the reason to follow this way of veneration (which I have argued above is a practice and not a doctrine) is that it is a tradition, i.e. a set of practices handed down over generations. Moreover, the knowledge that Mangkunagara IV is divulging, is from the very beginning of the *Serat Wedathama* equated with *agama* (I.1). There-

fore, the reason for upholding an *agama* is that it is a tradition. We have come across identical motivations when we discussed the reasons Javanese proffered for performing the *slametan* ritual: the common answer was that they continue the traditions of their ancestors. In the missionary reports we come across many instances where Javanese insist to stick to the traditions of their ancestors. Islam, or at least some practices of it, are considered a part of that body of traditions. The resilience of the Javanese traditions, even after conversion to Christianity, is very well documented. A telling instance is that of a Javanese Christian in Mojowarno who wants to “*ngatoeri nabi Mokammad*”, i.e. dedicate a meal to the prophet Mohammed (Hoezo 1863: 173). The missionary Hoezo explains that this is not possible, now that he has become a Christian. The man answers that he knows this, but that he would not be at ease, if he would neglect the practice. The missionaries were at great pains to explain their Javanese converts why they should abandon their traditions such as circumcisions and *slametans*. The Javanese attachment to the tradition of their ancestors is listed as one of the main obstacles to conversion (e.g. Brumund and Brumund 1854: 38, 57).

Secondly, the distinguishing trait of *agama* as tradition would be its practice, or the way it is practiced. Furthermore, distinctions between different *agama* would therefore (logically) also be expressed in terms of practice and not in terms of belief. The *Serat Wedhatama*, apparently also an exposé of an *agama*, offers no doctrines nor exegesis. It deals entirely with behaviour and practice. Moreover, its criticism of Islam is on the level of its praxis and the behaviour it inculcates. Brumund makes an observation along these lines. The Javanese villagers judge Christianity (or rather the Protestantism Brumund advocates) by its outer appearances: they consider it lacking in ceremony and ritual and therefore think it inferior to Islam, that has 5 daily prayer moments (Brumund and Brumund 1854: 130, 137). It is along the same line that we should understand the Javanese appreciation of Christianity as a *ngelmu* that travelling *kyai* such as Tunggul Wulung came to collect (Hoekema 1997). The Javanese in the missionary accounts seem to appreciate Christianity mainly as a practice. For example, they use its articles of faith to ward off snakes, but do not care for their meaning (Hoezo 1863: 177). Another interesting case is that of a *wedono*, known to be a pious Muslim, who asks one of the missionaries to “pray” for rain, because the “prayers” of the “Mohammedan priests” did not work (Ten Zeldam Ganswijk 1857: 106). Here too, relig-

ion (or at least aspects of it) is seen as a practice that is judged by its results (or absence thereof).

Thirdly, if *agama* is indeed a tradition -i.e. a fixed set of *practices*- then we should expect to see a difference between the way *agama* (as tradition) and religions approach the matter of truth. Religions such as Islam and Christianity, being divine revelations, preach a universal truth. That is to say, being universal, the 'message' these religions spread cuts across borders of time and race. After all, it deals with all creation, its origin and destiny and the place and role of mankind in it. Being a true, universal 'message' implies that other, different 'messages' cannot but be false. A case in point is how for a very long time Christians regarded Mohammed as an impostor. After all, how could he be a Prophet, if Jesus Christ was the Messiah and God's covenant with mankind had thus already been fulfilled? Similarly, their zeal to identify the Javanese religion made the Protestant missionaries look upon the Javanese traditions as false beliefs. However, the *Serat Wedhatama*, in its capacity of a mouthpiece of Javanese *agama*, nowhere makes the claim of being the truth. It does present itself as a path to the truth. Moreover, it presents itself explicitly as but one avenue amongst many. The way of the scholars of Islam is presented as the way of the *kaum*, which is distinct from the way of the Javanese nobility (e.g. II. 13-14). After all, Mangkunagara IV explains: "seeing that men are not all alike (...) there is no similarity between the paths that are embarked upon." (Robson 1990: 43; cf. Atmosaputro and Hatch 1972: 177; III.9). Different *agama* are thus different ways to reach the truth. Therefore, they are not competitors for the truth. We often come across this same sentiment in the accounts of missionaries. Harthoorn meets the *bekel* (local tax collector) of Lawung who is of the opinion that Christianity and Islam are actually very much the same and that, although at times they seem to be diverging, in the end they lead to the same destination. Harthoorn adds that he comes across this conviction often. (Harthoorn 1858: 155-56). Ten Zeldam Ganswijk, a fellow missionary, notes a complete indifference on behalf of a *santri* he meets in Malang regarding the content of their respective faiths. He readily admits to every tenet that undermines Islam. He experiences the same in a discussion with the *wedono* (Javanese civil servant) of Sidokari (Ten Zeldam Ganswijk 1858: 122-23). This too is not an isolated case. The instances where an actual 'theological discussion' does take place, it takes the form of a battle of wit or *kerata basa*. Such cases, as I have argued

above, cannot readily be taken for discussions on the content of faith, doctrine, belief, etc. Similar to the reluctance to discuss the religious motivations for holding a *slametan*, it is perhaps tempting to attribute such responses to prudence -especially in the face of representatives of colonial power. Still, the way the Javanese respond to such religious challenges is telling. On the one hand, the actual beliefs, and the difference between them, is treated with indifference. On the other hand, the difference between religions is depicted as a mere difference in avenue. Minimally, then, even if these responses are a display of prudence, the way in which *agama* is approached dovetails with the way it is done in *Serat Wedhatama*.

Fourthly, as traditions are fixed sets of practices handed down from generation to generation, they become tied specifically to a certain social group. We have seen that this is indeed the case in the *Serat Wedhatama*. The discussed *agama* belongs to the king of Java, and by extension to the Javanese nobility. It is thus a different *agama* from that of another social group, e.g. that of the *kaum*. In the missionary accounts too we find that the Javanese regard an *agama* as something that is tied to a social group. Harthoorn for example, is witness to a discussion between the missionary Jellesma and a Javanese man. The latter, at one point, declares that each people has its own God and its own religion -implying that conversion to Christianity would be inappropriate for him (Harthoorn 1858: 144-45). Moreover, many Javanese identify being Christian to being Dutch. The missionary Smeding learns that a Javanese pastor sold his *gamelan* upon his conversion. He deemed it inappropriate for a Christian to play the Javanese *gamelan*. However, it would be fitting for him to play the Dutch *gamelan*. Smeding has to explain to him that his conversion doesn't imply he should drop all things Javanese (Smeding 1861: 258-59). In a similar vein, it is often noted that many Javanese Christians run the risk of mimicking the Dutch, in dress and behaviour (Ten Zeldam Ganswijk 1857: 108). Brumund relates how a Javanese Christian, who is a potter by trade, has to explain to other Javanese that becoming a Christian does not imply taking up the professions of the Dutch, such as working in an office. This turns out to be hard to understand for the Javanese (Brumund and Brumund 1854: 57). Similarly, some Javanese seem to have rejected Islam on the ground of it being a religion only appropriate for Arabs and not for Javanese (See e.g. Ricklefs 2007: 183-89; Drewes 1966: 335).

Summarising then, the above paragraphs are intended as a partial alternative description of *agama* in the Javanese sense of the word. It should not be seen as my stance on what *agama* in Java is or was, but rather as a first indication of the extent in which *agama* as tradition is different from *agama* as religion. If one thing has become clear, then minimally that Javanese *agama* is not symmetrical to religion. I propose that it actually makes sense to speak of *agama* as a tradition. Doing so puts existing anecdotes and source material on Javanese religion in a different perspective. In the case of the *Serat Wedhatama* it even offers a new consistency.

8.6. Conclusion

The objective of the last two chapters was to add substance to the claim that syncretist 'Javanese Islam' is an experiential entity. I made this claim on the basis of two arguments. Firstly, I have argued that the conceptual genealogy shows that there is no empirical nor theoretical evidence for the existence of this 'Javanese Islam'. Secondly, I have argued that the constraints working on the Western experience of Java are Christian theological in nature: Western culture seems compelled to recognise religions in other cultures, even where they are actually absent. In other words, Western culture describes other cultures as pale variants of itself and in those descriptions religion is one of the main benchmarks. In the course of this dissertation I have referred to this as the assumption of the universality of religion.

Exposing 'Javanese Islam' as an experiential entity implies that there is no such thing in Javanese reality. The question then becomes, if it was not a Javanese religion these generations of Westerners were describing, then what do we make of such phenomena as *ngelmu* and *slametan*? After all, their existence can hardly be denied. The possibility of offering an alternative description of these phenomena should make my claim that 'Javanese Islam' is an experiential entity more acceptable.

The hypothesis that cultures are configurations of learning allows us to conceive of cultural differences in a different way. That is, cultures differ from each other in different ways. It might allow us to conceive of Javanese culture without taking recourse to a Javanese religion. I have tried to

make this suggestion more tangible by offering partial alternative descriptions of three core concepts in the construction that is 'Javanese Islam': *agama*, *slametan*, and *ngelmu*. In this endeavour I have taken 'practical knowledge' as a heuristic. As much as possible, I have looked for a Javanese voice on these three phenomena. The sources available to me are the same sources used in the standard textbook story on 'Javanese Islam'. Based on these partial re-descriptions, I would like to present the following three observations.

Firstly, it seems possible to talk about *slametan* as pure practice, about *ngelmu* as practical knowledge, and about *agama* as tradition in a consistent way. That is to say, the scarce 'Javanese descriptions' we have, seem to indicate that such conceptualisations make sense. However, much (too much) remains opaque and in the absence of a theory on practical knowledge or tradition, we cannot and should not regard these alternative descriptions as actual explanations of these phenomena. Still, minimally, these descriptions indicate the possibility of an truly alternative understanding of *agama*, *ngelmu*, and *slametan*.

Secondly, the discussed alternative partial descriptions have done away with the symmetry between religions such as Christianity and Islam one the hand and 'Javanese Islam' on the other. Moreover, the posited relationship between *slametan* and Javanese religion -the first being the expression of the world view contained in the latter- and between *ngelmu* and Javanese religion -the first being the beliefs and doctrines of the latter- have now dissolved as well. Consequently, the relationship, assuming there is any, between *agama*, *ngelmu*, and *slametan* needs to be researched from scratch. In fact, we can now start to appreciate what it could mean for the Javanese culture to be *different* from the Western culture. *Agama*, *ngelmu* and *slametan* become phenomena that seem to have no counterpart in Western culture. The hypothesis of cultures as learning configurations may help to further guide an inquiry into the nature of them.

Thirdly, the last two chapters have added substance to the claim that 'Javanese Islam' is an experiential entity. They have done so in two regards. On the one hand, they indicate in what respect certain data that do not fit the structure of the experiential entity 'Javanese Islam' get filtered out over generations. A case in point is how in anthropological literature Javanese reflections on *slametan*, indications of an absence of re-

ligious motivation, are filtered out. Another is how over time *ngelmu* is increasingly represented as an instance of magical belief or of mystical doctrine. In the old missionary accounts, however, we have found many indications that to the Javanese themselves *ngelmu* is nothing more than practical knowledge. The latter connotation has become completely ignored and lost today.

Summarising, if 'Javanese Islam' is an experiential entity and if *agama* is tradition -and I have presented many arguments that indicate this is the case- then a whole new field of research is opening up within the domain of Javanese Studies.

