Rethinking Javanese Islam. Towards new descriptions of Javanese traditions

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9. Conclusion

At this point I would like to recapitulate the main argument of this dissertation, the sub-arguments implied, the consequences of this argument, and the new avenues for research that have opened up as a result.

Perhaps though it would be wise to start off with pointing out the things I have not argued. Firstly, I would like to make very clear that I have not argued that there is no Islam in Java. Neither have I argued that Javanese Islam is not really Islam. Any reading of my dissertation in these terms is false. In fact, my dissertation is neither about Islam, nor about Javanese Islam, or even about Javanism. Rather, it is about the study of Javanese culture that makes use of these concepts, and consequently tries to make sense of Javanese traditions in these terms. Secondly, I have not made any claims about the Javanese, except that it is highly unlikely that the entire Javanese population is incapable of logical reasoning. Thirdly, I have not presented an alternative understanding of *agama*, *slametan* and *ngelmu*. I have merely provided partial descriptions of these phenomena, which I argue are consistent with the data that is available to us. We need many more of such descriptions before we can begin to form a truly alternative understanding of Javanese traditions. Fourthly, I have not argued that *agama* as *adat* is the counterpart for *agama* as religion. In other words, the structure of the representation of Javanese Islam -where *slametan* is its central ritual and *ngelmu* are its doctrines- is not replicated, nor presupposed in *agama* as *adat*.

This dissertation does deal with the theoretical problems involved with the scholarly understanding of certain aspects of Javanese cultural reality. It thus implies a critique on Javanese Studies to the extent that the concept of a syncretist Javanese religion is constitutive for this scholarly discipline.

Javanese Islam and Javanism as pieces of Christian theology

I have started my analysis with the observation that the understanding of 'Javanese Islam' as a syncretist religion that combines religious beliefs and practices from Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Animism and ancestor worship leads us into a logical inconsistency. I will not repeat my entire argument here, but it is necessary to stress that even if one considers Javanese cultural reality to be inconsistent, then still we cannot accept an explanation in terms of syncretism. After all, calling such practices and beliefs syncretist does not explain anything: syncretism is nothing more than a label for such practices. In terms of explanation it is simply not sufficient. If, however, one would consider it difficult to accept the idea that Javanese religious traditions are inconsistent, that the Javanese display inconsistent religious behaviour or hold inconsistent religious beliefs, then the concept of a syncretist Javanese Islam cannot but be a misrepresentation. Consequently, both instances justify the examination of the representation of the Javanese religious condition in terms of syncretism.

The point of departure for my investigation is the question of the origin of the notion of syncretist 'Javanese Islam'. The result is a genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' which allows us to make several observations. The first observation is that this genealogy is formed by several generations of representations, each building upon the former. The second observation is how each successive stage of descriptions stays within certain limits and does not exceed the terms of descriptions as laid out from the very beginning. In other words, there is a certain structure to these descriptions. The third observation is that this lineage of descriptions is part of a larger Western project of coming to terms with Javanese cultural and social reality. Thus, 'Javanese Islam' is a Western concept with which Western observers have tried to make sense of the Javanese religious condition. This means on the one hand, that the concept never was a Javanese term of self-description; at least not until Javanese scholars became acquainted with it through the existing scholarly discourse. Obviously then, their contribution is to a Western discourse, a discourse that has demonstrable Western roots. On the other hand it means that the concept of 'Javanese Islam' in itself owes little to nothing to non-Western sources. Such sources, e.g. Arab or Chinese ones, have only been used to corroborate or refute certain elements in, or furnish certain de-

tails to the existing dominant Western discourse. There is, to my knowl-edge, no conceptual counterpart for syncretist Javanese Islam to be found in these sources. In summary, the genealogy shows how the con-cept of a syncretist Javanese Islam gradually crystallised and how it, to-gether with its counterpart Javanism, had been completely developed as early as the 1860s. Both concepts have remained unchanged ever since and thus, for the purpose of this dissertation, there is no need to further extend the genealogy.

The genealogy does not only trace the historical development of the de-scriptions of religion in Java. It also describes the conceptual context within which it made sense to speak of syncretist Javanese Islam. Fol-lowing Balagangadhara, I have characterised this conceptual context or framework as essentially Christian theological. I have done so on three grounds. Firstly, I have pointed out that there is a great continuity in terms of the structuring concepts and the conceptual framework from the period of the very first descriptions of Javanese religion to now. In other words, this continuity stretches from the pre-Enlightenment pe-riod, when Western knowledge of the world was constrained by what could be gathered from the Bible, to the post-Enlightenment period, when knowledge about the world is deemed to be scientific or at least secular. This continuity is expressed in the kind of questions that appear to make sense to Western observers and what is considered a valid an-swer to such questions. Secondly, I have drawn attention to a key as-sumption in the description of religion in Java, viz. the universality of religion. This assumption entails the conviction that each culture has its own indigenous religion. I have discussed, again following Balagangad-hara, how this in origin theological tenet has become a scientific trivium by means of a process of secularisation. Relevant to the topic of my dis-sertation is the simple observation that in all the descriptions of Javanese religion the question never was whether the Javanese had religion but always what the religion of the Javanese was. The genealogy of Javanese Islam can thus be interpreted as an attempt, spanning several centuries, to answer that question. This illustrates the kind of constraints working upon both the experiences and epistemological efforts of generations of Western observers. Thirdly, closely tied to the assumption of the univer-sality of religion is the idea of a civilisational evolution, with different stages through which all of mankind needs to pass. Since each nation or culture was thought to have its own religion, and since measured to

Christianity other religions could not but be false religions, the religions of the world became ranked according to their rationality. At the pinnacle of this classification was Christianity -evidencing abstract mental capabilities- while the lower rungs were occupied by animist and polytheist religions -displaying less evolved, because more concrete, thought. Javanese religion, either called Javanese Islam or Javanism, was considered syncretist because it supposedly mixed up and confused the doctrines from different religions, some of which were actually mutually exclusive. This representation of the Javanese religious condition in terms of syncretism was not considered problematic at all. After all the Javanese were simply viewed as less evolved, and thus prone to committing logical inconsistencies. Only within such a conceptual framework does it make sense to speak of syncretist Javanese Islam. This framework, I argue, is both essentially and thoroughly theological. It is in this sense that we should consider the concept of syncretist Javanese Islam as a piece of Christian, Protestant, theology.

The concept has of course become secularised over time, meaning that the explicitly theological framework has reclined to the background. On the one hand this explains why a concept such as syncretist Javanese Islam might still seem intuitively meaningful. This is due both to the long currency of the concept and to the fact that Western culture has been profoundly shaped by Christianity. We could say that the theological framework is still lingering in the background. On the other hand, if we are no longer willing to condone certain theological tenets such as the universality of religion and the concomitant idea of a hierarchical ranking of religions, the concept of syncretist Javanese Islam leads one into logical problems -as argued before.

Furthermore, I have also used the genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' to demonstrate how this concept became structured. As I have argued, the description of Javanese Islam hinges on two concepts: belief and practice. Moreover, the practices that have come to be taken for Javanese religious practices are regarded as an expression of the religious beliefs of the Javanese. I have illustrated this with an analysis of scholarly representations of the Javanese *slametan*. Although this ritual has been described by different scholars in different ways -as Islamic, animist or syncretist- it has always been described according to the beliefs that are thought to underlie it. A second example I have discussed is that of *ngelmu*. Here

too, I argue, Javanese practices became represented in terms of beliefs. In fact, retracing the different *ngelmu* to their different religious roots (Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic) was one way of establishing that Javanese religion is a syncretist religion, i.e. a religion harbouring mutually exclusive religious beliefs. The way 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' were conceptually structured, i.e. centred on religious beliefs and taking certain practices for expressions of religious beliefs, is also indicative of the kind of constraints that have been working on their conceptualisation: Javanese religion has been conceived of as parallel to Christianity. Firstly, the *slametan* has become represented in analogy to the Christian ritual of the Eucharist of Lord's supper. It is considered the central ritual of Javanese religious life and it is thought to be the expression of the religious beliefs of the Javanese. Secondly, *ngelmu* initially were conceived of as the religious doctrines of the Javanese. As we saw someone like Harthoorn even went as far as calling Javanese *ngelmu* the Gospel of the Javanese.

Summarising, with the genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' I have argued that the process by which the West has tried to make sense of the Javanese religious condition was constrained by Christian theology. Not only the question as to the religion of the Javanese but also the answer, a Javanese Islam or Javanism in analogy to Christianity, are essentially theological, i.e. they can be traced back to theological tenets.

The post-colonial explanation - the explanatory force of the argument

I am hardly the first to consider syncretist 'Javanese Islam' or 'Javanism' a misrepresentation. Numerous scholars, especially from the period after Indonesia's independence, have singled out this concept in their critique of colonial scholarship as well. In particular the connotation of the Javanese being less than truly Islamic, or merely nominal Muslims received staunch criticism. And rightfully so. I have discussed such criticisms under the heading of post-colonial critique, as they localise the source of the misrepresentation in colonial hegemony. That is, they take the representation of the Javanese as nominal Muslims, and the religion of the Javanese as not truly Islamic, to be a wilful imagination on the part of colonial scholarship and government. The representation of the Javanese as tolerant, harmonious, in essence still animist and only out-

wardly Muslim, is said to be pitted against the rebellious, political Islam that threatened the colonial status quo. In other words, because Dutch colonial government feared Islam in Java as a political force, it stimulated the representation of the Javanese as nominal Muslims. I have pointed out several shortcomings in this type of argumentation. One thing is that it is not clear how this misrepresentation effectively furthered colonial interests. Why did colonial administration and scholarship choose this particular misrepresentation? Any answer to this question (such as driving a wedge between the world of the *kraton* and their peasantry on the one hand and that of the *pesantren* on the other) turns out to be *ad hoc* and thus has little to no explanatory power. As I have argued, the first critique of the concept of syncretist, i.e. nominal, Javanese Islam was executed by Snouck Hurgronje, the Netherlands' foremost orientalist scholar. The alternative he put forward, i.e. the Javanese are actually true Muslims, explicitly served the purpose of colonial dominance. Therefore, there is no necessary connection between colonial hegemony and the misrepresentation of the Javanese religious condition in terms of syncretist Javanese Islam. Hence, by referring to the presence of a colonial power structure we cannot explain why the misrepresentation that is syncretist Javanese Islam took the form it has taken.

The argument presented in this dissertation, however, does offer a necessary explanation, as it shows why the Javanese religious condition became represented as a syncretist religion, and not as something else. As I have discussed extensively, the concept of a syncretist Javanese religion as it is used in the contemporary scholarly discourse is the product of a Western endeavour to come to terms with Javanese reality. Thus, as reiterated above, 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' are the result of a culture-specific way, *in casu* of Western culture, of making sense of Javanese cultural reality. Western culture has been deeply and profoundly shaped by Christianity. Although there are many ways to argue for this point, for the purpose of this dissertation, it suffices to draw attention to the presence of certain epistemological constraints. As examined above, both the question as to the religion of the Javanese as well as what could count as an answer are in origin theological. However, after the Enlightenment when the explicit theological framework retracted into the background, both question and answer maintained their apparent appropriateness. I have referred to this as an instance of secularisation. The presence of such constraints explains why 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' have been

conceptualised the way they have. That is, once we identified these twin concepts as pieces of Christian theology, it also became obvious why they are structured the way they are.

A representation of what?

At this point the following question arises: if syncretist 'Javanese Islam' (or 'Javanism') is a misrepresentation, of what is it a misrepresentation? On this matter the argument presented in my dissertation diverges from the post-colonial one as well. The latter has it that syncretist Javanese Islam is a misrepresentation of nothing more or less than Islam in Java. That is, this Islam has assimilated certain elements from Java's pre-Islamic belief systems and culture. The end-result, local Islam if you will, is said to be simply the way Islam is practised in Java. This reasoning falls short on two main points. Firstly, the argument is not conclusive, be-cause what in the eyes of one Muslim is an acceptable Islamic practice, might not be acceptable in those of another Muslim (Javanese or other). In other words, the assimilation of such non-Islamic elements is con-tested within the Islamic community itself. Secondly, 'local Islam' does not depict the same phenomenon as syncretist Javanese Islam. Since the said assimilation entails bringing certain practices in line with Islamic teachings, it is implied that there is a moment when those practices are in conflict with Islamic teachings. Upholding religious practices and beliefs that are mutually exclusive is what is called syncretism. Therefore, syn-cretist Javanese Islam and assimilated Javanese Islam (i.e. local Islam) re-fer to two different phenomena. Consequently, the alternative presented by the post-colonial argument is not a true alternative explanation, as it leaves the initial misrepresentation untouched.

I have proposed that syncretist Javanese Islam or Javanism is in fact an experiential entity -another suggestion borrowed from Balagangadhara. This implies that syncretist Javanese Islam is an entity in the experiential world of those who have described it, viz. Western observers, rather than an entity in Javanese reality. Thus conceived, the genealogy of Java-nese Islam actually shows the crystallisation of this experiential entity or *Gestalt*. The structures of it were laid out from the very first descriptions onwards and were enriched with detail from generation to generation. I have described this process in terms of a loop between the actual experi-

ences and the descriptions of these experiences. The latter offered the possibility of reflecting on these experiences, and thus of infusing them with structure. Consequently, new experiences were more easily identified and structured. The result, syncretist Javanese Islam, allowed Westerners in Java to come to terms with certain aspects of Javanese cultural reality.

There are two reasons to consider this proposal. Firstly, there is indeed an absence of theoretical and empirical proof for the existence of Javanese religion. In fact, the genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' gives strong indications in that direction. The lack of theoretical proof is illustrated by the fact that 'proving' the existence of syncretist Javanese Islam or Javanism needs to either explicitly condone theology or assume the universality of religion. The lack of empirical evidence is illustrated by how certain phenomena are taken to be constitutive elements of Javanese religion, while explicit proof for this is absent. Cases in point are *slametan* and *ngelmu*. They have, despite evidence to the contrary, been consistently represented in terms of (underlying) beliefs. The suggestion that syncretist Javanese Islam is an experiential entity allows us to make sense of why and how these phenomena have come to be misrepresented. Secondly, and consequentially, we can now start to conceive of *slametan* and *ngelmu* in a different way.

New avenues - the productivity of the argument

The proposal that syncretist Javanese Islam or Javanism is an experiential entity does not mean that the Western observers were merely hallucinating. Actually, I have suggested that this experiential entity is constructed from different (fragments of) Javanese cultural phenomena. By employing a heuristic drawn from Balagangadhara's hypothesis on cultures, I have attempted partial re-descriptions of *agama*, *slametan* and *ngelmu*. Although the descriptions seem at first sight to paint a consistent image, they do not come close to being an alternative explanation. Firstly, it is unclear what the relationships, if any, between these phenomena are. Secondly, we do not know whether *agama*, *ngelmu* and *slametan* are phenomena that stand on their own, or are mere fragments of larger cultural phenomena. Thirdly, The descriptions so far have been generated by employing a heuristic. For an actual explanation we would need an ap-

propriate hypothesis -for which the suggestion of cultures as configurations of learning is pitched at a level that is far too high and abstract.

Much more work can be done in generating alternative descriptions. Many Javanese literary sources are still to be disclosed and even those that are could be scrutinised anew. Using practical knowledge and tradition as a heuristic could be an interesting possibility. For example, what can the *Serat Centhini* tell us about the slametan? Or how is knowledge conceived of in the *Sasana Sunu*? Another avenue for research could be in what way Javanese culture accommodated Islam. We saw an instance of this in the *Serat Wedhatama* where Islam was regarded as a practice, and the daily ablutions were integrated into an apparently Javanese system of spiritual practice. Moreover, we saw how Mangkunagara IV sets diligent practice of Islam by the *kaum* apart from the *agama* of the *priyayi*. What other *agama* were there in 18th and 19th century Java? On what basis were they distinguished from each other? Are the criteria for distinguishing *agama* from each other the same or different from distinguishing religions from each other? These are the kind of questions that emerge in the wake of the suggestions made in this dissertation.

Adjacent to the previous avenue is this last one I propose here. In the course of my dissertation I have barely considered the opinions and reflections of the Javanese themselves. This is partly due to the fact that the focus of my research has not been on Javanese cultural, social or religious reality itself, but rather on the study of it. However, it is also due to the fact that the accounts that do treat with this reality, hardly present the actual voice of the Javanese as such. Instead they offer interpretations and representations of the answers received to the questions they raised. As we saw, this all too often means that although the questions and answers make sense to the scholars, they do not necessarily make sense (in the same way) to their informants.

Besides the above mentioned avenues of research I would suggest that the argument presented in my dissertation has been epistemologically productive with regard to the existing discourse as well. Firstly, it explains why the discussion about the nature of Javanese Islam -syncretist vs. Islamic- is such a long-spun one. Syncretist Javanese Islam and assimilated Javanese Islam actually refer to two different things. The first refers to an experiential entity, the second to Islam in Java. Obviously,

such a discussion cannot be settled. This then is the first sense in which this proposal is epistemologically productive: it settles a centuries-old discussion by disclosing it as an empty one. Secondly, it shows why the concepts 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' are structured the way they are. As we saw they have been conceived as symmetrical to Christianity, which is the result of the specific constraints that have been working upon the process that brought about these concepts. This is a second indication that the proposal at hand is epistemologically productive: it does a better job at explaining the origin of the misrepresentation that is 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' than for example the post-colonial argument. Thirdly, this suggestion opens up new avenues of research. Much contemporary research on Javanese religion and culture keeps rehashing the same standpoints and arguments from the late 19th century: either one describes Javanese religion as a syncretist reconciliation of different worldviews, or one points out that Islam in Java has assimilated Javanese cultural elements. A dismissal of 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' opens the way for new questions and new hypotheses.

It is then on these grounds -the argument, its explanatory force, and its productivity- that I would like to put forward my dissertation for your consideration.