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REVISITING THE CONCEPT OF THE JAVANESE ISLAM: GENEALOGY, ACADEMIC REPRESENTATION, AND CULTURAL STRATEGY

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Kata Kunci:
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Abstrak

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk meninjau ulang pemahaman atas konsep Islam Jawa sinkretis, yang selalu menjadi perdebatan para sarjana. Mulai dari penelusuran secara genealogis atas konsep Islam Jawa sinkretis yang dibuat oleh para misionaris dan orientalis; pemetaan representasi akademis Islam Jawa yang diproduksi oleh para sarjana yang datang kemudian; hingga penjelasan mengenai pendekatan teoretis yang digunakan untuk membincang konsep sinkretisme. Berdasarkan penelusuran terhadap berbagai sumber kepustakaan, hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa konsep Islam Jawa sinkretis yang dirumuskan oleh para misionaris dan orientalis, cenderung bersifat teologis akibat dari kerangka kekristenan yang digunakan. Mereka secara khusus memperhatikan gagasan universalitas agama, evolusi peradaban, hirarki agama-agama dan kemurnian doktrin agama. Para sarjana yang datang belakangan pun cenderung mewarisi konsepsi Islam Jawa yang cenderung bernuansa teologis ini. Mereka selalu memperdebatkan 'kebenaran' atau 'kemurnian' Islam Jawa, hingga melahirkan dua kubu yang saling berseberangan. Intensitas perjumpaan budaya dan keniscayaan sinkretisme inilah, yang kemudian membutuhkan adanya pendekatan teoretis yang lebih kokoh untuk memperoleh pemahaman yang lebih tepat mengenai sinkretisme.

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Abstract

This article aims to revisit the understanding of the concept of syncretic Javanese Islam, which scholars have much debated. From the genealogical search for the syncretic Javanese Islamic concept produced by missionaries and orientalists; mapping of the academic representations of Javanese Islam produced by recent scholars; up to an explanation of the theoretical approach used to discuss the concept of syncretism. Based on selected literature sources, the results show that the syncretic Javanese Islamic concept formulated by missionaries and orientalists tends to be highly theological due to the Christian framework used. They were especially concerned about the universality of religion, the evolution of civilization, the hierarchy of religions, and the purity of religious doctrine. Recent scholars also tend to have inherited this conception of Javanese Islam. They constantly debated the 'true' or the 'purity' of Javanese Islam, thus resulting in the two dominantly opposing views. The intensity of the cultural encounter and the necessity of syncretism requires a more robust theoretical approach to obtain a more precise understanding of syncretism.

Introduction

When academia and public space mention the term of the Javanese Islam, the first thing that comes to mind is that it has been closely associated with syncretism, impurity, and thus religious corruption.[1] The most prevalent reason for such attribution is that Islam, as practiced in Java, used to be relatively distorted or relaxed[2] for allegedly un-Islamic elements had tainted it.

Originating from layers of the pre-Islamic religious traditions, some

[1] Zamakhsyari Dhofier, "The Pesantren Tradition: A Study of the Role of the Kyai in the Maintenance of the Traditional Ideology of Islam in Java" (Australian National University, 1980), xiv; Masdar Hilmy, "Towards a Religiously Hybrid Identity? The Changing Face of Javanese Islam," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 12, no. 1 (2018): 46,48,65; Agus Salim, "Javanese Religion, Islam or Syncretism: Comparing Woodward's Islam in Java and Beatty's Varieties of Javanese Religion," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 3, no. 2 (2013): 225; Jamhari, "Javanese Islam: The Flow of Creed," *Studia Islamika* 9, no. 2 (2002): 9; A.G. Muhaimin, "God and Spiritual Beings in the Cirebon-Javanese Belief System: A Reluctant Contribution against the Syncretic Argument," *Studia Islamika* 3, no. 2 (1996): 24; Jochem van den Boogert, "The Role of *Slametan* in the Discourse on Javanese Islam," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 45, no. 133 (2017): 352–353; Bernard Arps, "The Power of the Heart That Blazes in the World: An Islamic Theory of Religions in Early Modern Java," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 47, no. 139 (2019): 308, https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2019.1654217; Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 5–6; Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Marocco and Indonesia* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago press, 1968), 12.

[2] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 370–371.

of which were animistic, Hindu-Buddhist, or remnants of ancestor worship.[3] At the mid of the twentieth century, when Clifford Geertz undertook his research in Modjokuto, the Javanese atmosphere was quite thick. It is arguably to Geertz that Javanese Islam fame owes some homage, as his book, *The Religion of Java* (1960), had sparked broad discussion of syncretist Islam to which some Javanese themselves did not pay much attention. The dividing line between *santri* and *abangan* was relatively easy to detect.[4] However, people did not talk about religion in public, except those actively engaged in Islamic institutions or organizations, such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama.[5] Islam was at the periphery of people's daily lives and only thinly marked their identity.[6] It was not until the 1990s that Islamic symbols began to be in public space, and Islamization has enthusiastically precipitated.[7]

In the last two decades, Islam has appeared more conspicuously in the public space in Java and Indonesia in general.[8] Not only have Indonesian Muslims demonstrated a stricter adherence to Islamic teachings, but some fundamentalist orientation has also been on the air.[9] Islamization has been rampant, transforming what had initially been associated with Javanism into something legitimately Islamic, as in the case

[3] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," *Dissertation Submitted to Leiden University* (Leiden University, 2015), 10.

[4] Timothy Daniels, *Islamic Spectrum in Java*, *Islamic Spectrum in Java* (Surrey, UK & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 48; M. C. Ricklefs, *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and Other Visions (c. 1830-1930)* (Leiden, The Netherlands: KITLV Press, 2007), 82.

[5] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 130.

[6] Timothy Daniels, *Islam. Spectr. Java*, 48; Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 158.

[7] Kevin W. Fogg, *Indonesia's Islamic Revolution* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 28–29.

[8] Robert W Hefner, *Islam Pasar Keadilan: Artikulasi Lokal, Kapitalisme, dan Demokrasi*, ed. M. Imam Aziz and Amiruddin (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2000); Joel S Kahn, "The Inner Lives of Javanese Muslims: Modern Sufi Visions in Indonesian Islam," *Social Imaginaries* 3, no. 2 (2017): 15–36.

[9] Andrew Beatty, *A Shadow Falls: In the Heart of Java* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), ix; Andrew Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 247.

of *slametan* and *tahlilan*.[10] Symbols of Islam are everywhere, including in places that would otherwise have no connection whatsoever what anything Islamic, such as halal tourism,[11] sharia-based hotel,[12] and sharia housing,[13] to name just a few. Surveys have shown that Indonesian Muslims have been increasingly practicing Islam.[14] This continued Islamization of Java is "among the most complex and politically consequential in the world,"[15] considering the historical and cultural trajectory that it has traversed. Ricklefs stated that there even was a paradigm shift regarding how scholars have viewed Javanese Islam, resting primarily on two reasons: first, the dramatic change in terms of the role that Islam played within Javanese society, especially since the mid-1960s, and second, the amount of new research done.[16]

Furthermore, intensified Islamization has arguably impacted the diminishing *abangan* lifestyles, on the one hand, also caused hardened religiosity among Javanese Muslims, one the other.[17] Andrew Beatty

[10] Sangkot Sirait, "Religious Attitudes of Theological Tradisionalist In The Modern Muslim Community: Study on Tahlilan in Kotagede," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 10, no. 02 (2016): 237–260.

[11] A. Tohe et al., "Halal Destinations in Asia: A SWOT Analysis," in *Halal Development: Trends, Opportunities and Challenges*, ed. Heri Pratikto et al. (Leiden: CRC Press/Balkema, 2021), 7–8.

[12] M Zainal Anwar, "Sharia Expression in Contemporary Indonesia: An Expansion from Politics to Economics," *Ulumuna* 22, no. 1 (2018): 97.

[13] Yuyun Sunesti, Addin K. Putri, and Mokhamad Z. Anwar, "Sharia Housing, Sustainable Communities and Civic Pluralism in Surakarta," *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 716, no. 1 (2021): 1–6.

[14] Jajat Burhanudin and Kees van Dijk, eds., *Islam in IndonesiaL Contrasting Images and Interpretations* (Amsterdan: Amsterdam University Press, 2013).

[15] Robert W Hefner, "Review: Islamization and the Changing Ethical Imagination in Java," *Indonesia*, no. 96 (2013): 187.

[16] M. C. Ricklefs, "Rediscovering Islam in Javanese History," *Studia Islamika* 21, no. 3 (2014): 407.

[17] Azyumardi Azra, "Book Review: Islamisasi Jawa" 20, no. 1 (2013): 172,175; Robert W. Hefner, "Where Have All the Abangan Gone? Religionization and the Decline of Nonstandard Islam in Contemporary Indonesia," in *The Politics of Religion in Indonesia: Syncretism, Orthodoxy, and Religious Contention in Java and Bali*, ed. Michel Picard and Rémy Madinier (London & New York: Routledge, 2011), 71–91; Haedar Nashir and Mutohharun Jinan, "Re-Islamisation: The Conversion of Subculture from Abangan Into Santri in Surakarta," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 8, no. 1 (2018): 1–28; Boogert, "The Role of *Slametan* in the Discourse on Javanese Islam," 352,355.

gained first-hand experience with such muscled Islamism in his prior research site. In his *Varieties of Javanese religion* (1999), Beatty showed how 'Java' coped with cultural pluralism and with 'the challenges to personal identity, mutual tolerance, and social harmony that it presents,' fitted neatly within the then prevailing paradigm that striving for harmony was the foundation of Javanese culture.[18] The menacing title of his memoir, *A shadow falls: In the heart of Java* (2009), mirrors his grief at the imposing presence of a group of Islamic hardliners in a rural village in East Java in the 1990s that disturb the bucolic peace of 'his' village.[19] Again, Java is said to have 'lessons for us all,' but no longer ones about happy multiculturalism.[20]

In terms of Javanese Islam, Geertz's *The Religion of Java* book has left an indelible mark in the collective memory of the Javanese or Indonesian and worldwide. The reality of Javanese Islam that few people were bothered about suddenly became a hot topic for discussion. Somewhat unexpectedly, the ideas presented in the book have provoked divided responses among other and subsequent scholars who study Islam in Indonesia. The majority of scholarship on Javanese Islam post-Geertz is oppositional, either affirming the syncretist nature of Islam therein or brushing a normative picture of it. Consequently, essentializing stereotypes of normative Islam and Javanism compete with each other at the two ends of the spectrum.[21] Ironically, these incompatible explanations of Javanese Islam coalesce as if mimicking the very syncretism they are debating. Islam and Javanism were treated as mutually exclusive, albeit with conflicting perspectives. Certain yardsticks were employed to measure the purity of each: for Islam, the standard version was that of the Middle East or the reformed local Muslims as a proxy, closely tied with strict adherence to Islamic scriptures and, in the meantime, Javanism was

[18] Andrew Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account*, 1.

[19] David Kloos, *Becoming Better Muslims: Religious Authority and Ethical Improvement in Aceh, Indonesia* (Princeton, NJ & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 106.

[20] Andrew Beatty, *A Shadow Falls: In the Heart of Java*, x.

[21] M. C. Ricklefs, "Rediscovering Islam in Javanese History," 399.

identifiable in either the *abangan* or *priyayi* or both,[22] although the people whose Geertz's controversial trichotomy represented—*santri, abangan,* and *priyayi*—were undisturbed by their cross-boundary mingling, friendship, and neighborly life, just as much the aura of religiosity, nationalism, and even secularization coexisted.[23] The Javanese were concerned with ethics in general. Mutual respect, harmony, and a general tolerance based on "contextual relativism" are part of the general truths binding them despite differences.[24] Nevertheless, intergroup conflicts also took place.

Within the broad spectrum of scholarship of Islam in Java, the term "Javanese Islam" has intriguingly been so forceful, connoting the alleged contamination that Islam had to endure concerning local Javanese elements. Curiously, the demeaning meaning of Javanese Islam is not stated explicitly in Geertz's book or even in his trichotomy. Geertz mentioned that Java was 90 percent Muslim during his research. However, Geertz used Javanese religion or Javanese syncretism instead of Javanese Islam. He intended to show how much variation in ritual, the contrast of belief, and conflict in values lie behind the census. In short, with the terms used, Geertz wanted to accentuate the religious diversity in contemporary Java, to bring home the reality of the complexity, depth, and richness of their spiritual life, not to deny the underlying religious unity of its people.[25]

This Javanese religion is the same as Javanese syncretism or Javanese religious syncretism.[26] According to Geertz those terms consists of three religious traditions. (1) The *abangan* religious tradition, made up primarily of the ritual feast called the *slametan*, of an extensive and intricate complex of beliefs in spirit, and a whole set of theories and practices of curing, sorcery, and magic. (2) The purer Islam which is called *santri*. Although the

[22] Masdar Hilmy, "Towards a Religiously Hybrid Identity? The Changing Face of Javanese Islam," 45–46; Ricklefs, "Rediscovering Islam in Javanese History," 399; Ken Miichi and Omar Farouk, "Introduction," in *Southeast Asian Muslims in the Era of Globalization*, ed. Ken Miichi and Omar Farouk (Hampshire & New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 1.

[23] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 370–372.

[24] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 356, 366-367.

[25] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 7.

[26] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 5,6,132.

santri subvariant is associated with the Javanese trading element in a broad and general way, it is not confined to it, nor are all traders, by far, adherents of it. There is a solid *santri* element in the villages, often finding its leadership in the wealthier peasants who have made the Pilgrimage to Mecca and set up religious schools upon their return. The *santri* religious tradition, consisting of careful and regular execution of the basic rituals of Islam and a whole complex of social, charitable, and political Islamic organizations is the second subvariant of the general Javanese religious system. (3) The *priyayi,* originally referred only to the hereditary aristocracy, which the Dutch pried loose from the kings of the vanquished native states and turned into an appointive, salaried civil service. This white-collar elite, whose ultimate roots were in the Hindu-Javanese courts of pre-colonial times, conserved and cultivated a highly refined court etiquette, complex art of dance, drama, music, poetry, and a Hindu-Buddhist mysticism. They stressed neither the animistic element in Javanese syncretism of the *abangans* nor the Islamic element of the *santris*, but the Hinduistic.[27]

While it is possible, as Geertz might well know, that the people of Modjokuto mainly were Muslims, the terms he used, however, are intentionally chosen to show the plurality of their religious orientations, despite being Muslims. In other words, they are Syncretic Javanese Muslims. Of the three religious traditions or subvariants or subtraditions, *santri* and *abangan* can be generally identified as Muslims, in which the former possesses "purer" Islam than the latter. The *priyayi*, on the other hand, are Hinduistic. There are further divisions within the *santri* subtradition, including reformist or modernist, on the one hand, and conservative and *kolot* on the other. The former's Islam is still purer than the latters'. In the meantime, while not explicitly linked to syncretism, the term Javanese Islam is also predicated on a similar religious orientation, provided pre-Islamic religious tradition. Thus, Javanese Islam suggests that it is Islam that Javanese, that is to say, syncretic. These terms—

[27] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 5–6.

Javanese religion, Javanese syncretism, and Javanese Islam—overlap. However, there is a significant different in actual meaning between Geertz's terms and Javanese Islam. In that, the former retains a spacious space for allegedly genuinely orthodox Muslims in the *santri,* especially the reformist or modernist, and the latter appears to suggest otherwise: while confessing Muslims, they are Javanese, and thus syncretist. Orthodoxy or normative Islam is out of the picture altogether. The questions are thus, whence did the term Javanese Islam originate? Who did formulate it? How is it structured? What relation does it have with the discourse of *The Religion of Java*?

This article questions the existing scholars' perspectives on Javanese Islam, which is intentionally theological but presented as an academic enterprise. The general question has always revolved around whether or not Javanese Islam is genuinely Islamic, within which scholars have engaged in a theological dispute as theologians.[28] It primarily argued that this is the result of the Christian framework that the early Europeans, including the Dutch missionaries, used to understand Javanese religion and convert the Javanese into Christianity, thus tracing its genealogy. Subsequently, it will examine the relations between Javanese Islam's discourse and Javanese syncretism or Javanese religion sparked by Geertz's *oeuvre* and how scholarship has addressed it. This article tackles the problem of syncretism, assesses the process through which the term is predominantly pejorative, and consider the proposal offered by scholars to devise a more robust theoretical approach to syncretism.

The Genealogy of Javanese Islam

For the Indonesian readership, the general knowledge concerning the origin of the concept of Javanese religion in general and Javanese Islam, in particular, is probably thought of as starting from the publication of Clifford Geertz's *Religion of Java* and the plethora of scholarly responses

[28] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 3,144,148-149.

in its wake, in the middle of the twentieth century. However, the concept of syncretic Javanese religion wholly developed one century before Clifford Geertz's *The Religion of Java* hit the bookshelves. The study of Javanese religion was initiated and developed by members of Western culture to make sense of Javanese culture. This process spans several centuries and shows both continuity and evolution.

The descriptions of religion in Java achieved a sure standardization after Raffles and Crawfurd. Both consider the religion of the Javanese to be Islam, if in a modified version. Islam in Java, they claim, has been changed to suit the specific Javanese situation. More precisely, the precepts of Islam have mixed with native customs and laws from Hinduism.[29] Raffle and Crawfurd's renditions of the Javanese spiritual condition are constantly reproducing in Dutch civil service handbooks and popular travel accounts.[30] Raffles' *The History of Java* (1817) is considered a breakthrough in the study of Java. It quickly became an absolute authority, and its references in later works are innumerable. Almost immediately after its publication and for at least half a century, virtually every scholar on Java used Raffles' History as an essential reference work. Crawfurd's *History of the Indian Archipelago* (1820) is also one of the standard works on Indonesia and Java in particular—to which the most significant part of the work is devoted. Both laymen and scholars referred to Crawfurd and Raffles.

Three Dutchmen, all tied to the Protestant church, took a crucial step in the middle of the 19th century. The first, J.F.G. Brumund (1814-1863), was a minister and an esteemed scholar in his time. The second, S.E. Harthoorn (1831-1883), was a Dutch Protestant missionary who concluded that the attempts to convert the Javanese have to remain fruitless as long as the Javanese had not appropriately 'educated' and 'civilized.' The third, C. Poensen (1836-1919), another Dutch Protestant

[29] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 76.

[30] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 67-68,88.

missionary in East Java. His translations of Javanese texts, numerous descriptions of Islam in Java, and his teaching of the Javanese language in Delft made him well-known and influential amongst scholars on Java. Still, his intellectual and scholarly abilities were subject to criticism from the famous Islam scholar Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje.[31]

Brumund introduced the concept of the Javanese Muslim and thus of 'Javanese Islam'- in his 1854 *Berigten omtrent de evangelisatie van Java* (Bulletins on the evangelization of Java). It is a compilation of his journals of visits to the different Javanese Christian communities around Surabaya. In this text, he speaks consistently of the "Javanese Mohammedan." Brumund further describes the Javanese Muslim as indifferent to the run-down state of his Mesjid, as having no sense of history, which implies that he is less evolved, as being only superficially Muslim, and generally being very superstitious. In Brumund's description, the Javanese Mohammedan is a confessed Muslim who still practices the ancient superstitions. According to Brumund, Javanese Islam is a nominal Islam that is only outwardly professed, but its core is Hinduism and worship of nature (what today we would call 'animism'). The same idea re-emerges with Harthoorn and Poensen. However, they clearly describe a union of the many superstitious beliefs and ceremonies with Mohammedanism, which they call syncretism.[32]

The 'Javanism' was firstly mentioned in Harthoorn's annual report of the year 1857, *De zending op Java en meer bepaald die van Malang* ("The mission on Java and more specifically the one of Malang"). He analyses the mental-moral-religious condition of the Javanese and the way this influences their behavior. A good understanding of this condition, Harthoorn believes, will enable the assessment of the chances of effective evangelization. 'Javanism' actually refers to the same phenomena as

[31] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 106–108.

[32] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 108–110.

Brumund's 'Javanese Islam.' To Harthoorn, the religious consciousness of the Javanese has its origin, not in Islam, but in 'Javanism'. Consequently, Javanese Islam is but a subcategory to 'Javanism'. While Islam might be the state religion and the Javanese could be formally Muslims, their indigenous or popular religion (*volksgodsdienst*) is Javanism[33] In Harthoorn's own words:

> It [Javanism] is not an original religious doctrine, not an original system, but the **unnatural union** of the old religious service with the Indic and Arabic religion and philosophy. The old religious service consists in the worship of nature and the adjuration of ghosts, enriched with a couple of ideas from elsewhere.[34]

Elsewhere in the same report, Harthoorn calls this "unnatural union" syncretism, the cause of which ultimately lies in the inertia of the Javanese, i.e., in their laziness, which in turn had been caused by Java's bountiful nature that fulfilled the Javanese's modest needs. The "unnatural union" Harthoorn speaks of is a union of different religious systems, such as worship of natural forces, worship of deceased ancestors, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Shivaism, and of course, Islam. It was deemed unnatural because, strictly speaking, some of these systems would be mutually exclusive—something, as Brumund pointed out as well. Bringing such divergent religious strands together, reconciling them, is called syncretism. To a large degree, Harthoorn's description echoes the received wisdom. The novelty is that he calls this mixing "syncretism" and baptizes the mixture "Javanism." Harthoorn persistently studied the beliefs and then the practices or ceremonies of this religion. He aimed to find the core of Javanism and explain its syncretism, which he deemed the Javanese's mental moral-religious condition. Harthoorn hoped to find an explanation for the difficulties in converting the Javanese.[35]

[33] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 110.

[34] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 111.

[35] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions

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

> The religion of the Javanese world is the product of Buddhism, Brahmanism, Shivaism, Mohammedanism, etc., that has not been processed and brought to a whole, but has been all mixed up and miraculously confused (...) A number of eras and occurrences has brought the Javanese world into contact with confessors of different religions; she has adopted something from each, outwardly and often unconsciously.[36]

In later works, Poensen calls this miraculous confusion "syncretism." Like Harthoorn, he claims this syncretism is the result of the nature of the Javanese: their passivity and laziness, their inferior mental condition. Poensen's description is also very much in line with what his predecessors had been saying: the Javanese are Muslims, but only superficially; they profess Islam only outwardly, both laypeople and clergy; they have little to no knowledge of the Qur'an, except maybe for a few proverbs and sayings; those who know how to recite a couple of Arabic formulas, do not know their meaning; the Javanese hold ideas and conceptions that are in contradiction to Islam and are in fact of Brahmanic, Buddhist or Shivaist origin; generally speaking it suffices for a Javanese to be circumcised to consider himself a Muslim. Poensen, like Harthoorn and Brumund, thus adds more substance to old convictions by

of Javanese Traditions," 111–112.

[36] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 112.

relating his day-to-day experiences with the Javanese. His description of Javanese Islam is an extensive listing of all the different Javanese religious beliefs and practices. As he attempts to order them, Poensen comes close to the idea of a spectrum of different Javanese Islams, according to the extent they deviate from the teachings of Islam.[37]

Taken together, the works of Brumund, Harthoorn, and Poensen signal a new phase in the understanding of religion in Java. Firstly, the introduction of the concept of 'Javanese Islam' and its counterpart 'Javanism.' Secondly, the conceptualization of the mere mixing of tenets from different religious systems as syncretism. More so than 'mixing,' what' syncretism' expresses is that the different religious tenets brought together actually do not go together. This theme links Brumund, Harthoorn, and Poensen. Thirdly, the accounts from Harthoorn and Poensen (and Brumund) are rich in ethnographic detail and were treated as data, i.e., as facts, by other scholars such as Snouck Hurgronje.[38]

In comparison, these three gentlemen had several things in common. Firstly, all three had propagated the Protestant faith in East Java. Poensen and Harthoorn were engaged in missionary activities; Brumund visited many settlements of Javanese Christians on which he reported extensively. Therefore, they were thoroughly familiar with both the Islamic Javanese and Christian Javanese of that region. Secondly, they were all convinced Protestants, albeit of different theological strands. Their understanding of the world, its history, and the nations inhabiting it was framed by Protestant theology. Thirdly, all three were well versed in the relevant literature on Java at that time. Lastly, their accounts of the Javanese spiritual condition became the sources for orientalist scholars in the Netherlands. This phase unique because it sees the birth of the concept of a syncretist Javanese Islam—the concept still used today.

[37] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 112–113.

[38] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 113.

This genealogy of 'Javanese Islam' allows us to make several observations: (1) this genealogy is formed by several generations of representations, each building upon the former, (2) 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 (there is a particular structure to this description), (3) 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 spiritual condition.

The concept was never a Javanese term of self-description, at least not until the Javanese scholars became acquainted with it through the existing scholarly discourse. The concept of Javanese Islam owes little to thing to non-Western sources. Together with counterpart, Javanism, the concept of Javanese Islam has gradually crystallized and completed as early as the 1860s. The genealogy shows that the constant in these descriptions is Christian theology. Thus, syncretist 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' turn out to be just that: pieces of Christian theology.[39] In this period, according to the Western, Biblical, or theological understanding of the world, only four religions were thought to exist: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Heathenism. Each of these was assigned a rung on a ladder. Christianity occupied the top position; one rung lower was Judaism, then Islam, and the rest. The last part, the rest, comprised heathens, pagans, idolaters, or sometimes polytheists.[40] The rest, or Heathenism, was considered the furthest digression possible from the proper path.[41]

The genealogy traces the historical development of the descriptions of religion in Java and describes the conceptual context within which it

[39] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 3.

[40] Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), xi.

[41] Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 54–55.

made sense to speak of syncretist Javanese Islam. this conceptual context or framework is essentially Christian theological.[42] (1) there is continuity concerning the structuring concepts and the conceptual framework from the first descriptions of Javanese religion until now. In other words, this continuity stretches from the pre-Enlightenment period, when Western knowledge of the world was constrained biblical insights, until the post-Enlightenment period, when knowledge about the world is scientific or, at least, secular. (2) the fundamental assumption in the description of religion in Java, viz. universality of religion. This assumption entails the conviction that each culture has its indigenous religion. The question was never whether the Javanese had a religion but what their religion was. The genealogy of Javanese Islam can thus be interpreted as an attempt, spanning several centuries, to answer that question. (3) Closely tied to the idea of the universality of religion is the idea of civilization evolution. The different stages through which humanity needs to pass. Since each nation or culture is thought to have a religion and measured against Christianity, this other religion could not but false.

A scale of the world religions, based on their rationality, was made in which Christianity occupied the pinnacle—evidencing abstract metal capabilities—while the lowest was occupied by animist and polytheist religions—displaying evolutionary lag. 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 mutually exclusive. After all, the Javanese, viewed as less evolved, were thus prone to committing logical inconsistencies. It thus makes sense to speak of syncretist Javanese Islam within such a conceptual framework. This framework thus is both essentially and thoroughly theological. In this sense, the concept of syncretist Javanese Islam is a product of Christian Protestant theology. In addition, there is a recurrent theme throughout the research on Java during the 19th and 20th centuries,

[42] Anita Maria Leopold and Jeppe Sinding Jensen, eds., *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 8.

which confronts the pure (i.e., genuine) and corrupted (i.e., declining) character of religion. It reflects a Western preoccupation with the doctrinal purity of religions, which is highly influential to the conceptualization of Javanese Islam as a syncretist religion.[43]

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 behaves in a way that is arguably un-Islamic? Framing their observations, in terms of religion, mainly superficial or an authentic Islam, they lent intelligibility to their experiences. Indeed, one of the issues in the discourse on Javanese Islam is the adherence of Javanese Muslims to pre-Islamic beliefs and practices taken to undermine their status as true Muslims. If it is not Islam, then the Javanese must follow a different religion which, like universal religions such as Christianity and Islam, has two main components: belief and practice. As a result, these Western observers isolated *slametan* and *ngelmu,* respectively, as the ritual, expressing a Javanese worldview and the religious beliefs of the Javanese. By describing Javanese religion as having its own core religious beliefs and doctrines (or worldview) and having its central religious ritual, it becomes symmetrical to Semitic religions.

Moreover, these Western observers retraced different kinds of *ngelmu* to their different religious roots (Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic) to establish that Javanese religion is a syncretist religion, which harbors mutually exclusive religious beliefs.[44] They made sense of the Javanese religion within a theoretical framework that subscribes to certain key theological verities—namely the universality of religion, the civilization evolution stages, and the purity of religion.

The question is this: did the Javanese themselves think of their religion that way? Cultural differences between the West and Java

[43] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 79.

[44] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 249.

potentially bring about the differences concerning their dominant learning processes. Balagangadhara suggests that, within each human group, there are different learning processes (and consequently different kinds of knowledge). The difference between cultures can then be mapped out according to the structuration of these learning processes.[45] These different kinds of learning processes are then coordinated that one learning process becomes dominant and the others subordinated. As a result, one kind of meta-learning dominates the other learning processes and their meta-learning. Consequently, even though all kinds of knowledge are present in each culture, these pieces of knowledge are produced in a culture-specific way, that is, by a specific learning configuration.

Based on Balagangadhara's hypothesis, the difference between Western culture and Asian, *in this case,* Javanese culture, thus, manifests in terms of the dominant type of knowledge (i.e., the result of a learning process). Heuristically, we have the following contrast-set: theoretical knowledge versus practical, performative knowledge. The first deals with "knowing-about," the second with "knowing-how-to." The result of the first is abstract knowledge, and the result of the second is a skill. Thus, the suggestion is that practical knowledge is dominant in 'Eastern' cultures and theoretical knowledge is dominant in the West. However, the suggestion that Western culture leans toward a penchant for theoretical knowledge and Asian culture toward practical knowledge does not identify the essence of the respective culture. The idea of learning configuration leaves the possibility of envisaging many differences and nuances, and in no way does this hypothesis reduce Western or Asian culture to a monolithic or fixed entity. In this case, we attempt to find symmetry between how religion is understood in the West and Java. Let us discuss the case of the Javanese religion with this perspective.

Picard argues that the concept of *agama* used to be conflated with

[45] S.N. Balagangadhara, *"The Heathen in His Blindness..." Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 446.

the concept of *adat* in Indonesia.[46] It means that *agama* was considered an adat, i.e., a tradition. In general terms, traditions are usually fixed sets of practices handed down from generation to generation. If *agama* is indeed a tradition, then it might be possible to deduce a number of its characteristics.[47] Firstly, a tradition is upheld for tradition's sake, implying there is no need for an exterior reason for upholding it. 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 must believe in Allah to be a Muslim, and Muhammad is His Messenger. Muslims uphold their rituals out of belief: prayers are performed as God's command, not because someone else forces her. However, the original Javanese conception of *agama* is one in terms of a tradition. Therefore, in Javanese descriptions of *agama*-as-tradition, the motivation of their adherence to it is based on it being a tradition and based on belief.

Secondly, if *agama* is a tradition, it is logical to expect that its distinguishing trait is the practice or how it is practiced. Distinctions between agama and religion are made first and foremost based on 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. However, in *agama*-as-tradition, the focus is on the practice of it. The distinction between different *agama* is thus expressed in terms of practice rather than in terms of belief.

Thirdly, if *agama* is indeed a fixed set of practices, there will be a difference between the way *agama*-as-tradition and *agama*-as-religion approach the matter of truth. For example, both Christians and Muslims believe that the revelation as recorded in the Bible and the Qur'an respectively is the truth. Moreover, their truths are exclusivist. To accept

[46] Michel Picard, "Introduction: 'Agama', 'Adat', and Pancasila," in *The Politics of Religion in Indonesia: Syncretism, Orthodoxy, and Religious Contention in Java and Bali* (London & New York: Routledge, 2011), 6.

[47] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 195–197.

either of these two doctrines as true excludes the other one false. In this sense, different *agama*-as-religion are competitors for the truth. However, *agama*-as-praxis cannot be true or false. Ascribing such predicates to practice would be a category mistake. It would make no sense to claim that this or that ritual execution is the truth. Instead, 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, 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 than correct belief: orthopraxy instead of orthodoxy. It seems to be the expression 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. In a similar vein, we would expect the Javanese to describe *agama*-as-tradition tied to a specific social group. Contrary to this is *agama*-as-religion explicitly aiming at transcending social and national boundaries. After all, religions such as Christianity and Islam claim to be the truth, which is a universal truth, and consequently, they cannot be tied exclusively to one social group.[48]

So far, we have already sketched *agama*-as-tradition, i.e., as a fixed set of practices. Afterward, this article looks at how the Javanese themselves seem to reflect on the *slametan* and *ngelmu* that, in the Western conception of Javanese religion, are treated as the essential building blocks, corresponding respectively to practice/ritual and belief. Do these self-descriptions show an inclination to performative or practical knowledge? Do they corroborate or rebut the conventional description in terms of *agama*-as-religion?

There is probably little (if any) disagreement that of all of the

[48] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions,".

Javanese tradition, the *slametan* is the most essential. It is said to be at the very heart of the religious life of the Javanese.[49] To Geertz, the *slametan* is the core ritual of the abangan religion, and understanding this ritual is the key to the abangan worldview. The more profound sense of *slametan* is religious, and its performance finds its motivation in the Javanese worldview, where the danger of losing one's *slamet* is averted by implementing the *slametan*. This understanding of the *slametan* relies on the assumption that 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.[50]

The *slametan* is also often understood as a syncretist ritual. It can be interpreted in two ways: as the expression of a syncretist worldview or as a 'syncretizing' of multiple worldviews. How does the *slametan* express a syncretist worldview? It does so by harboring elements from different religious traditions that are incompatible but somehow have been reconciled in a strict sense. 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, 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. 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* thus is not permitted. However, this is precisely happening within the *slametan* ritual, it does not seem to pose a problem. Therefore, the ritual is considered syncretist because of this 'reconciliation' of incompatible beliefs.[51]

[49] Thomas Schweizer, "Economic Individualism and the Community Spirit: Divergent Orientation Patterns of Javanese Villagers in Rice Production and the Ritual Sphere," *Modern Asian Studies* 23, no. 2 (1989): 297; Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account*, 50; Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 11.

[50] Thomas Schweizer, "Economic Individualism and the Community Spirit: Divergent Orientation Patterns of Javanese Villagers in Rice Production and the Ritual Sphere," 298.

[51] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 201.

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* expresses three worldviews: 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.[52] Each of these varying interpretations is 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."[53] To Beatty, a vital part of the *slametan* ritual is the public exegesis of the ritual's symbolism by which a systematic integration of very disparate ideas is achieved. Social compromise is then reached "through their combined expression in ritual."[54] This quality, which Beatty calls syncretism, enables social harmony and religious tolerance. Here, too, the *slametan* is described and understood as the embodiment of beliefs of different worldviews. Only by 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.

Woodward argues that Javanese Islam is, in fact, Sufism, which is mystical Islam but, most importantly, authentic 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 vital religious rituals such as the *slametan*. Woodward makes his case based on 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

[52] Andrew Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account*, 39.
[53] Andrew Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account*, 239.
[54] Andrew Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account*, 40.

interpretation of the *slametan* in mystical Islamic, Sufi terms.[55]

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. As previously argued, the crystallization of 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' occurred within a Christian theological framework. Moreover, Javanese religion was constructed as symmetrical, though inferior, to Christianity. Within this construct, *slametan* was designated a similar position as the Lord's Supper within Protestantism or the Eucharist in Catholicism. *Slametan* 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. These descriptions of *slametan* are 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. The prevalent epistemological constraints have led to a description of *slametan* as an expression of religious beliefs. If Javanese culture is a culture whose learning configuration 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.[56]

We would expect to find such Javanese reflections on the *slametan* in describing this ritual. However, when, from time to time, a Javanese voice shimmers through, it raises doubts about the veracity of the general understanding of the *slametan*. Thus, there is no such reflection of the

[55] Mark Woodward, *Java, Indonesia and Islam* (London & New York: Springer, 2011), 125–128.

[56] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 205.

Javanese on the *slametan*. 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*, 'continues the tradition of the elders.[57]

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

"Despite 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 imprinted their existence on the villagers' belief system, expressing their willingness to assist. 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."[58]

What should we make of the 'implicit interpretation' Beatty hints at instead of the explicit ones that are absent? Who is to say that the ritual embodies 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? Why should we press to understand the *slametan* as an embodiment of beliefs and meaning if the Javanese actors 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.,

[57] Thomas Schweizer, "Economic Individualism and the Community Spirit: Divergent Orientation Patterns of Javanese Villagers in Rice Production and the Ritual Sphere," 298.

[58] Hyung-Jun Kim, *Reformist Muslims in a Yogyakarta Village : The Islamic Transformation of Contemporary Socio-Religious Life* (Canberra, Australia: ANU E Press, 2007), 155.

for fear of creating religious controversy or perhaps of risking reprisals. However, if 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'?[59]

This kind of reasoning—or rather the absence of a certain kind of 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 can these rituals be the expression of one or more of these worldviews? Therefore, it is proposed to consider the possibility that they are not and instead approach the phenomenon of *slametan* as a practice.[60]

The analysis shows that the *slametan* is not motivated by religious beliefs, nor is it an expression or embodiment of religious beliefs. It can be argued based on two points. Firstly, Javanese analysis, interpretation, 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 explaining is essential, or minimally as necessary, as its result, viz. the explanation. Therefore, the act of 'explaining' the ritual also becomes a performance. Secondly, Javanese testimonies contradict their motivation for holding a *slametan* located in religious beliefs. It seems that the correct execution of any ritual (including the *slametan*) is of much greater importance than its (purported) meaning.[61]

[59] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 210.

[60] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 211.

[61] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions

There are thus sufficient reasons to doubt the accuracy of an understanding that the *slametan* is the expression of a worldview or specific religious beliefs. The Javanese seems to understand the *slametan* tradition as pure and straightforward praxisby avoiding any motivation in terms of doctrines or beliefs. 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 particular set of constraints, these descriptions turn the *slametan* into a ritual that is symmetrical to the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. Indications of this are the central role it has in the construct 'Javanese Islam' and the way it is rendered intelligible as an embodiment or expression of certain religious beliefs. The description of ritual, such as the *slametan* generated within an Asian, *in casu* Javanese culture focuses on the *slametan*. Unfortunately, there are very few descriptions of *slametan* by the practitioners themselves.

Next, Javanese *ngelmu;* is it religious belief or practical knowledge? In the accounts of Poensen, Harthoorn, and Hoezoo, *ngelmu* describes it as a kind of a doctrine or a belief. It has been the preferred understanding of *ngelmu* ever since. In the following paragraphs, however, this study argues that there are sufficient reasons to conceptualize *ngelmu* as a specific kind of knowledge, viz. a practical knowledge.[62]

It argues that the *ngelmu* discussed in the Serat Wedhatama is a kind of practical knowledge. It 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* within the Javanese religious matrix appears practical knowledge. It needs to be performed, i.e., done, to obtain a specific goal or avoid a kind of mishap.[63]

Those conceptions of Javanese Islam are conseptualized in the

of Javanese Traditions," 214.

[62] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 218.

[63] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 235.

Christian theological framework, which underlines the universality of religion, civilization evolution, the hierarchy of religions, and purity of religion. Christianity was used as the yardstick. Thus, in the case of Javanese Islam, first, it looks at whether it is Islam, as confessed. When it is found negative due to its syncretic nature by harboring incompatible elements from different religious origins, including animistic elements, it asks what the true Javanese religion is and its belief and practice. *Ngelmu* and *slametan* are chosen to represent the Javanese religion's belief and ritual, despite the absence of such description by the Javanese.

Academic Representation

From the above explanation, we have established three things: Firstly, the descriptions of 'Javanese Islam' and 'Javanism' in the missionaries' accounts are very much in line with the descriptions of Javanese religion from previous generations. While the early orientalists talked about religious practices and beliefs of different origins, the missionaries described this in terms of syncretism. The latter term stresses the incompatibility of such religious beliefs. Still, the structure of the concept of Javanese religion remained the same. Secondly, we have established that their theological background determined how these missionaries approached their missionary tasks. An analysis of the missionaries' understanding of 'Javanese Islam' and Javanism' shows that these two concepts are theological concepts. Thirdly, the descriptions of Javanese religions are all structured along with the same themes. These themes are constantly being rehashed. Furthermore, this rehashing is evidence of a loop between the Western experience of certain aspects of Javanese cultural reality and the descriptions. The discourse on Javanese religion is a Western discourse, constrained by Christian theology.[64]

The way these concepts are conceived is identical to current definitions of, e.g. *"abangan* religion" (Geertz 1964), *"abanganism"* (Hefner

[64] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions,", 120–121.

2011), *"agami jawi"* (Koentjaraningrat 1989), Islam *Kejawen* (Woodward 1989), and "mystic synthesis" (Ricklefs 2006).[65] It seems that the only evolution over the last century and a half has been to adjust the negative connotations associated with the idea of syncretism. Syncretism has been regarded as the hallmark of the Javanese spiritual condition for a long time.[66] Furthermore, where some see in this Javanese religion a syncretist core (e.g., Ricklefs 2006), others claim its essence is Islamic albeit in Javanese expression (e.g., Woodward 1989), or a multitude of Javanese expressions of Islam, ranging from syncretist to orthodox (Daniels 2009).[67]

For centuries, Java Island had been a space of encounter between two cultural and religious traditions of the world, one from the Middle East and the other from South Asia.[68] The two religious traditions had interacted with the native culture for more than a millennium before Islam arrived.[69] The encounter between the two religious traditions, in addition to the native spirituality of animism and ancestor's worship, have created the landscape upon which Javanese build their peculiar beliefs and practices. Amid the plethora of religious traditions, as the receiving society, the Javanese did not passively adopt external cultural elements but modified them to suit their taste.[70] The Javanese indigenization project was so massive and persistent that no religions that arrived in Java remained untouched. These foreign religions are not only considered as different from religion in their countries origin but also degenerated.[71]

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[65] Jochem van den Boogert, "The Role of *Slametan* in the Discourse on Javanese Islam," 352.

[66] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 119.

[67] Timothy Daniels, *Islam. Spectr. Java*, 3,12.

[68] M. C. Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Norwalk, CT: EastBridge, 2006), 5.

[69] Taufiq Rahman, "'Indianization' of Indonesia in an Historical Sketch," *International Journal of Nusantara Islam* 1, no. 2 (2014): 56–64.

[70] M. C. Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries*, 4.

[71] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 79,127,128.

Some think of this religion as essentially syncretist (e.g., Geertz 1964; Ricklefs 2006). Others deny this syncretist nature and claim that Javanese Islam is true Islam in a Javanese expression (Woodward 1989, 2011; Florida 1997). Still, others take a position somewhere in the middle and prefer the idea of a multitude of Javanese expressions of Islam with room for syncretism (Daniels 2009).

For many scholars, this syncretism is associated with denying Javanese religion's 'truly' Islamic character and the concomitant claim that its 'true' core is either animism or Hinduism. Clifford Geertz (1960), a prominent American anthropologist, gave a new twist to earlier colonial representations. According to Geertz's historical representation, before the advent of Hinduism, the Javanese were animists. In about AD 400, Hinduism and Buddhism began to gain a stronghold. Around AD 1500, Islam came through sea trade expansion. The notion of essentially tolerant, accommodative, and flexible Javanese took another crucial point. Instead of opposing any incoming religion, the Javanese thought to have taken all necessary ingredients to form a new synthesis.[72]

As animism was the first religion on Java that had long become an established tradition, argued that animism has made a significant contribution. As animism is essentially a religion adopted by commoners, animism must have a stronghold among the village peasants and must have shaped their syncretism. Hinduism, which came and taken to constitute Javanese statecraft and state polity for more than a thousand years, must also have been a contributory factor that significantly impacted overall Javanese cultural formation. Through its inherent caste doctrine, which legitimates elite domination, its impact must have been the strongest among the court aristocrats because they benefited from this religion. Accordingly, Hinduism shaped these aristocrats' syncretism and worldview.

On the other hand, Islam, which came late via trade expansion, and

[72] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 5.

had its further spread hampered by the presence of European colonialism and the spread of Christianity, must have had less influence. It touched only the surface of the existing Hindu/Buddhist animistic cultural rock. Accordingly, in Java, "Islam did not construct a civilization, it (only) appropriated one."[73] Islam was an alien tradition adopted and brought by unsettled traders in the coastal areas to the Javanese. After long peaceful assimilation, Islam gradually formed enclaves of trading communities in towns and wealthy farmers. The Muslim communities adopted a syncretism that stressed Islamic cultural aspects. As a result, contemporary Javanese society has complex socio-religious groups. Wherein, *abangan* represents the animistic aspect of Javanese syncretism and is mainly associated with the peasant; *santri* represents the Islamic aspect of syncretism and is related to trade, and *priyayi* emphasizes the Hindu aspect and is related to the bureaucratic element..[74]

Geertz turns three local cultural categories into ideal types describing the religious system of Java associates them with different positions in the social structure. In his approach, *santri* are the "pious" or "purer" Muslims associated with trade and the market, *priyayi* are associated with the government bureaucracy and combine Islam, animism, and Hindu-Buddhism, with an emphasis on the latter. In contrast, *abangan* is associated with the village integrating these same religious streams but emphasizing animism. Geertz provides a detailed ethnographic account of the beliefs and practices associated with these religious variants. Once again, as in earlier Dutch and British accounts, "purer" Islam is located amongst a small community of more normative practitioners used as a standard to place the other variants that emphasize Hindu-Buddhism and animism, respectively. Geertz depicted most Javanese Muslims as merely nominal, surface Muslims. He paid little attention to the diffuse presence of Sufi mysticism in Java, asserting that it had been in decline since the

[73] Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 11.

[74] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 6.

Wahhabi purification of Mecca in the 1920s.[75]

In stark contrast to Geertz and most other outside observers, Mark Woodward, another American anthropologist, locates much more "Islam" in Java's plural array of religion. Woodward argues that Javanese traditional religion is, in fact, Islam. He fundamentally distinguishes two variants of Islam in Java: normative Islam (i.e., orthodox, legalistic Islam) and Islam *kejawen* (i.e., Sufi mysticism). He sees both variants as different answers to the same "single set of questions concerning the way or ways in which Islam should be interpreted and acted upon."[76]

The first answer is to "reject any rite or belief that is not in accord with the strictest possible interpretation of monotheism," and the second is "to search out scriptural precedents and legal justifications for practices. That, though not of Arabic or even Muslim origin, have come to hold prominent positions in popular Islam."[77] Through these "interpretative strategies" (especially the latter), pre-Islamic cultural and religious practices and beliefs have become thoroughly Islamic. Woodward claims that the Islamisation of Java has been so profound that the Javanese outlook on the world (worldview) has become essentially Islamic. In order to further argue this, Woodward reverts to "axiomatic structuralism." It involves the claim that several axioms or epistemological structures that shape the way people see the world. Religion plays an essential role in the formulation and articulation of such cultural axioms. According to Woodward, Javanese religion and society are Islamic because certain aspects of Muslim doctrine have taken the place of those of Hinduism and Buddhism as the axioms of Javanese culture.[78]

In particular, Woodward gives much greater recognition to the

[75] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 184.

[76] M. R. Woodward, "Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta," *Islam in Java: normative piety and mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (1989): 30.

[77] M. R. Woodward, "Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta," *Islam in Java: normative piety and mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (1989), 228.

[78] M. R. Woodward, "Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta," *Islam in Java: normative piety and mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (1989, 4, 22–30, 248.

significance of Sufi mysticism in Java. He reinterprets much of what Geertz considered Hindu-Buddhist and animist traditions to indicate of deeply penetrated Sufi mystical traditions. He considers Javanese Sufi traditions an integral part of the worldwide history of Islamic mysticism, which has often been at odds with more legalistic dimensions of Islam. *Abangan*, *priyayi*, and *santri* are located solidly within this broad Islamic tradition. He considers *abangan* and *priyayi*, construed as different social classes, to be mystics (*kejawen*) of the mystical variant he calls "Javanese Islam" or Islam Jawa, and *santri* are of the normative Islamic or normative piety variant.[79]

Responses to Geertz's treatment vary from total and uncritical acceptance to solid rejection. In between these two extremes, some have accept it with caution, and others merely repeat his jargon and use it for different purposes and situations. Strong criticism of this syncretic argument and the ensuing *abangan-santri-priyayi* trichotomy have come from several scholars, such as Bachtiar (1973), Suparlan (1976), Koentjaraningrat (1963), and Nakamura (1984). Concerning the doctrinal aspect, criticism came from Dhofier (1985:6), Hodgson (1974), Pranowo (1991), and Woodward (1989).[80] In the meantime, several scholars, especially Indonesian intellectual circles, have warmly received Woodward's work to correct the mistaken image of most Indonesians as only nominal Muslims and giving greater recognition to the Sufi traditions. Muhaimin, an Indonesian scholar, Similar to Woodward, concludes that "Traditional Islam" has completed the removal and replaced all other religious elements contrary to Islamic monotheism.[81]

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[79] Mark R. Woodward, *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 2.

[80] A.G. Muhaimin, "The Islamic Traditions of Cirebon: Ibadat and Adat Among Javanese Muslims : Ibadat and Adat Among Javanese Muslims," *The Islamic Traditions of Cirebon: Ibadat and Adat Among Javanese Muslims : Ibadat and Adat Among Javanese Muslims*, no. July (2006): 3–4.

[81] A.G. Muhaimin, "The Islamic Traditions of Cirebon: Ibadat and Adat Among Javanese Muslims : Ibadat and Adat Among Javanese Muslims," *The Islamic Traditions of Cirebon: Ibadat and Adat Among Javanese Muslims : Ibadat and Adat Among Javanese Muslims*, no.

In between the two opposing poles, as Geertz and Woodward, other scholars take a position somewhere in the middle. They prefer the idea of many Javanese expressions of Islam with room for syncretism. Daniels (2009) and Boogert (2015) are two of them. Daniels thinks that Geertz underplayed Sufi mysticism and overplayed the continuation of Hindu-Buddhist and animist streams. Woodward tends to overplay Sufi mysticism and underestimates continuities of Hindu-Buddhist and animist elements, arguing that Muslims have largely Islamized Hindu-Buddhist trace elements. Of course, Muslims in all social segments have reinterpreted many of these elements through Islamic lenses within localizing Islam in Java. However, they have not integrated all elements of former religious streams into the broad Islamic tradition. Some of them continue to indicate Hindu-Buddhist or animist thought in practice in the views of many participants and local observers. Indeed, *kejawen* or Javanism is interpreted in several different ways locally, but a popular view of this variant considers it a mix of Islam with many traditional Javanese elements. This mixture has also had an impact on Javanese Catholics and Protestants.

Therefore, Daniels argues for an approach somewhere between Geertz and Woodward's ideal types, conceding that Javanese Muslims have reinterpreted many elements of previous streams within the broad Islamic tradition while acknowledging that others have not Islamized. Ongoing processes of Islamization appear more advanced in the urban areas amongst the palace and educated elites; however, Geertz's pluralist perspective has continued relevance, especially for popular religion in the villages and urban neighborhoods. Woodward's insights, stemming from a refined analysis of elite court discourse and textual sources, continue to be highly significant. However, Daniels attempts to provide a more extensive ethnographic base from which to discuss the range of Javanese Islam, not taking it to be coterminous only with the mystical variant.[82]

July (2006): 273.

[82] Timothy Daniels, *Islam. Spectr. Java*,39–40.

According to Daniels, like all other religions, Islam is not a monolithic entity with the same limited and fixed set of ideas and practices wherever we find it. Islam widely shares some core texts, ideas, and symbols. However, but these are given different meanings wherever Islam is practiced and shaped through complex local, national, regional, and global factors.

In other words, trying to understand Islam in Indonesia from merely a study of core Islamic texts or from what Islam appears to be in the Middle East will not get very far. Nevertheless, when considering global or transnational factors as an additional level of analysis, some ideas and practices flow into Indonesia from Malaysia, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, for instance, and at times these take on an authoritative character.

Nevertheless, these flows, however influential, never determine the general character of religion in Indonesia, which has a solid local flavor made from a multiplicity of local cultural resources, diverse historical contacts, and political-economic conditions.[83] In addition, a mature theory of religion has to treat each dimension of religion without reducing it as a whole to anyone dimension. Daniels strives to treat Islam as a complex religious system serving numerous functions. Including intellectualist or explanative, emotional, cathartic, social—both unifying and conflictive—and symbolic ends.[84] Diverse Indonesian Muslims are shown to produce a broad spectrum of projections of desirable futures with varied uses of "religion" and secular ideas.[85]

Meanwhile, Boogert claims that Geertz's description of abangan religion is identical to Harthoorn's concept of Javanism, as embedded in Protestant theology. The universality of religion, civilization evolution, religious practices express religious beliefs are all explicitly part of that theological framework within which it makes sense to speak of syncretist Javanese religion. Discussing *abangan* religion as the indigenous animist

[83] Timothy Daniels, *Islam. Spectr. Java*, 3.
[84] Timothy Daniels, *Islam. Spectr. Java*, 5.
[85] Timothy Daniels, *Islam. Spectr. Java*, 12.

religion of the Javanese, while Geertz does not explicitly condone such a theological framework, this tapestry of theological concepts is actually still present in the background, in the form of several assumptions shared by members of the same Western culture.[86] Moreover, Boogert demonstrates the vast array of Islamic variants in Java which has posed problems for insiders and outsiders to delineate.

Most outsiders, including Western anthropologists and scholar-administrators, have tended to locate Islam in a small segment of this continuum, only amidst the "pious" Muslims. While correcting this error, Woodward erred to locate Sufi Islam throughout the range of "abangan" variants. If for some locals this is accurate, for others, it distorts their interpretations of these practices and perhaps assumes that the Islamized interpretations of the palace hold across local society. The insiders also disputed how much Islam is located across this diverse array, using contested categories to this end.[87]

As a result, Boogert wonders, why is there so much dispute on the nature of this religion? Why are scholars unable to determine whether it is Islamic, Hindu-Buddhist, or Javanist? Why is it not clear what its doctrinal core is? A simple comparison with, e.g., Lutheranism shows how strange this is. We know the name of Lutheranism is, for Lutherans call themselves Lutherans. We know the nature of Lutheranism is: it is a branch within Christianity.

Furthermore, we know which doctrines we can plot the different Lutheran denominations. In the case of Javanese religion, such clarity is entirely lacking, and Boogert argues that this is an indication of the theoretical issues at stake.[88] The same thing happens when Woodward argues that Islam has become the organizing principle, i.e., the axioms, of Javanese society and culture. Cultural and religious practices such as the

[86] Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 149.

[87] Timothy Daniels, *Islam. Spectr. Java*,159.

[88] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 27–28.

slametan, magic, wayang, the reverence of saints; the concept of power and kingship; Yogyakarta palace architecture; meditation orders; all commonly regarded as typically Javanese, become instances of Sufi theology in Woodward's account. However, in the absence of a sound and conclusive argumentation that shows whether and how these Javanese cultural and religious hallmarks have derived from Sufi theology (cf. Van Bruinessen 1989; Wilder 1992), Woodward's explanation is nothing more than a circular argument. That is, once Woodward has decided that the whole of Javanese culture and religion permeated with Sufism, he takes the examples listed above as self-evident proof -which they are not.[89]

Unwilling to pick a side between Geertz and Woodward's explanation of Syncretist Javanese Islam, Boogert goes further, that syncretist Javanese Islam is an experiential entity. Javanese Islam does not exist in reality but only in the experiential world of the West.[90] Western observers were confronted with phenomena they had trouble rendering intelligible. By framing observations to religion and, consequently, superficial or in-authentic Islam, they lent intelligibility to their experiences.

The rendition of their observations in, e.g., travel accounts, helped to structure their own experiences and the experience of successive generations of observers. It is evidenced by how each new generation built on the descriptions of the former.[91] After the initial fragments have been selected—i.e., conceptualized as religious beliefs and practices—each phase represents a reinforcement of the initial structure and thus of the experiential entity Javanese Islam. However, the structure of the experiential entity does not self-evidently relate to a structure in Javanese cultural reality.

[89] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 147–148.

[90] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 179.

[91] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 183.

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.[92] As an experiential entity, syncretist 'Javanese Islam' or 'Javanism' helped generations of Westerners to come to terms with Javanese cultural reality.[93] The two arguments are based on the claim that syncretist 'Javanese Islam' is an experiential entity. Firstly, the conceptual genealogy shows no empirical nor theoretical evidence for the existence of this 'Javanese Islam.' Secondly, the constraints working on the Western experience of Java are Christian theological: Western culture seems compelled to recognize religions in other cultures, even where they 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.[94]

Rectifying Syncretism as a Cultural Strategy for Cultural Encounter

As mentioned above, two contrasting views have dominated the understanding of Javanese Islam: one saw it as syncretist or Javanese, and another as validly Islamic. The first view had prevailed for some time and dominated the scholarly discussion of Javanese Islam, implying a pejorative understanding.[95] The problem of these two approaches is that they provide a theological view for a cultural phenomenon. Syncretism is best explained descriptively or analytically rather than in an evaluative manner. As such, these scholars, while offering rich data, have followed the step of early western orientalists and missionaries, whose understanding of Javanese Islam is either predicated on their protestant

[92] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 184.

[93] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 213–214.

[94] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 241.

[95] H. L. Richard, "Religious Syncretism as a Syncretistic Concept: The Inadequacy of the World Religion Paradigm in Cross-Cultural Encounter," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 31, no. 4 (2014): 210.

belief or passing a value judgment onto the genuineness of other people's beliefs.

Clifford Geertz represents one of the spectra and has been criticized not only for his value-laden judgment for the Javanese Muslims as not genuinely Muslims but also for misrepresenting some religious practices, i.e., *slametan* and *ngelmu,* as representing the religious belief of the Javanese. Geertz would have been fine had he merely described Javanese Islam as syncretist and analyzed how it came to be, without a value judgment concerning its normativity or otherwise. After all, syncretic undertaking analogous to religious conversion is not an event occurring only at one point in time. It is a gradual process through which its agents continue to learn and understand properly the newly embraced religion and make the necessary adjustment in terms of how to treat their old and new beliefs and practices based on the newly acquired knowledge. Just like the Islamization in Java has actually demonstrated, the Javanese Muslims become more pious over time as they have more chances to learn.

On the other end of the spectrum, scholars, such as Woodward, have sinned outright dismissal of syncretism in Javanese Islam, on the one hand, and intellectualization, on the other, by relating everything allegedly non-Islamic to Sufism so that becoming Islamic. While Woodward is partially correct, it is likely that not all Muslims were able to 'Islamize' everything, provided their differing intellectual capabilities, and not all things initially non-Islamic have been Islamized, as Daniels argued.

What is valuable to learn from this is that agency is crucial in any syncretic enterprise. As the partaker of a syncretist undertaking, the human agents engaged in power relations interpret the semiotic signification of the process and experience the cognitive transformation. While the assessing these dynamics has been complex, the individual and agentic social capacities of those involved complicate the matter even further.[96] The Javanese Muslims at the time were not necessarily knowledgeable of

[96] Leopold and Jensen, *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, 376–388.

proper Islamic teachings. Therefore they did what they did by mixing conflicting old and new religious beliefs and practices without knowing the inconsistency and incompatibility therein.

Learned Javanese Muslims might conduct the same syncretist practices, but provided their sufficient understanding of normative Islam, they could justify such practices Islamically and, therefore, become perfectly normative. In this case, it is intriguing why there has been little discussion in the existing studies of such learned Javanese Muslims practicing syncretism. Otherwise, the larger picture of Javanese Islam could have been significantly different had there been balanced representatives of a broad spectrum of Javanese Muslims in understanding syncretic religious practices.

Furthermore, the Islamic justification for some syncretic practices does not come from a Sufistic perspective. It can also reason within the mainstream Sharia legal framework that allows Muslims, in their different places, to appropriate local practices as long as they are aligned or made congruent with fundamental Islamic teachings. One of the fundamental principles of Islamic law reads *al-'adah muhakkamah* (social customs are sources of legal decisions).[97]

Some scholars, however, have advocated a far more positive evaluation of this syncretism. A case in point is Andrew Beatty's (1999) remarkable work on the Javanese *slametan*. His discussion of this Javanese ritual as a case of 'syncretism in practice' aims to show the syncretism's positive, beneficial qualities of syncretism. After all, the *slametan* as an instance of syncretism in practice brings forth tolerance amongst Javanese villagers.[98] Meanwhile, Daniels is a step ahead of Beatty. He considers the normative of the Javanese Islam and the plethora of non-Islamic practices have not entirely assimilated in such normativity, and thus accomodating to a broad spectrum of Javanese Muslims' religious orientations.

[97] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 158,160.

[98] Jochem van den Boogert, "Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards New Descriptions of Javanese Traditions," 119–120.

What is essential with this explanation is acknowledging that syncretism is a cultural phenomenon. A scholarly account of it must explain what transpires in society, academically, not theologically. Indeed, scholars are responsible for explaining what is in the field with further interpretation and not simply taking at face value what their subjects tell them. However, scholars are not as well at liberty to violate the perception and understand their subjects. Otherwise, they will arrive at the wrong conclusions. It is exemplified by the misrepresentation of *slametan* and *ngelmu* as stand, respectively. The ritual and beliefs of *Agama Jawa,* are analogous to universal religions, such as Christianity and Islam. One possible reason is that some scholars understood the inability of the Javanese to explain themselve and why they did *slametan* and *ngelmu*. Their simple answer, "it is the way of their ancestors and tradition," is unsatisfactory because they were shy or did not want to create controversy or draw attention to themselves by explaining themselves. Therefore, these scholars interpreted both practices in their way and according to their knowledge of universal religions.

For that reason, it is apt at this point to revisit our discussion concerning syncretism, not necessarily in pejorative terms, but with appreciation, for it is a cultural necessity and an integral part of becoming humans. Although distinctive traditions and institutions often characterize societies, in terms of distinctive traditions and institutions, no known society is the new product of its history, untouched by contact with other cultures. Instead, cultural change always operates on interconnected systems in which variously linked societies within more expansive "social fields."[99] Indeed, all traditions result from historical transformation processes, hybridization, and contamination, which do not have easily discerned borders,[100] and all human societies are "secondary," often

[99] Luther H. Martin and Anita Maria Leopold, "New Approaches to the Study of Syncretism," in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion. Volume 2: Textual, Comparative, Sociological, and Cognitive Approaches*, ed. Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz, and Randi R. Warne (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 96.

[100] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Doube Consciousness* (London & New

tertiary, quaternary, or centenary.[101] Consequently, the concept of syncretism casts doubt on the notion of "purity," that is to say, the idea of a religious tradition that is culturally independent of influences, loans, and changes.

However, syncretism is a tricky and much-debated term.[102] Its main difficulty is using both an objective and a subjective meaning. The basic objective meaning refers neutrally and descriptively to the mixing of religions. The subjective meaning includes an evaluation of intermingling from the point of view of one of the religions involved. As a rule, the mixing religions condemned in this evaluation as violating the essence of the belief system. However, as we will see, a positive subjective definition also belongs to the possibilities.[103] This confusion of meanings, caused by the problems of redundancy and imprecision that have characterized and continue to characterize the use of the category "religious syncretism," has motivated scholars to propose the abolition of the term.[104]

However, the term is so widely used that even a scholarly consensus to do away with it would not lead to a general moratorium on its use. Its abandonment is the more improbable when one considers that the number of contacts between believers of different religions increases daily. With that, the phenomenon refers to the term 'syncretism,' in all senses of the word. In the discussion on inter-religious dialogue, the term would continue used in any case, particularly by those who are opposed to such an endeavor and who constantly warn against the danger of syncretism (in the negative subjective sense). Moreover, those seeking religious contextualization may use it in a positive and sometimes almost proud and

York: Verso, 1993), 97,199.

[101] Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2010), 76.

[102] Maryse Kruithof, "Shouting in a Desert: Dutch Missionary Encounters with Javanese Islam, 1850-1910" (Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2014), 185–199.

[103] Andre´ Droogers, *Play and Power in Religion* (Berlin & Boston: de Gruyter, 2012), 198.

[104] Leopold and Jensen, *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, 8.

defiant sense, especially in concrete situations in the Third World.[105]

The paradigm shift in looking at syncretism began when secular history scholarship introduced the idea of the "invented tradition."[106] Invention and syncretism are both creative responses to contemporary contexts. At this point, the flexibility and adaptability of "inventive" (as opposed to invented) religions are most apparent. Inventive religions are constantly changing, meeting challenges and acting in the modern world to retain relevance, combat hostile conditions, and demonstrate continued value for members and potential converts.

In late modernity, consumerism quickly, easily and almost everywhere influenced cultural exchanges, cultural appropriations, commodification, and the marketing of spiritualities. There is now great choice in the spiritual marketplace for the seeker,[107] and religious "creativity" is increasingly important in a world where innovation is valued. Here, sacred creativity is seen as a symbolic bridging of the mundane secular and the transformative sacred.

Scholars now demand that the concept of syncretism be defined more clearly. If necessary, different forms are distinguished and described through narrower concepts such as assimilation, parallelism, inculturation, contextualization, indigenization, and so on.[108] The following is a brief

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[105] Martin and Leopold, "New Approaches to the Study of Syncretism," 101; Droogers, *Play and Power in Religion*, 195.

[106] Carole M. Cusack, "Foreword," in *Invention of Tradition and Syncretism in Contemporary Religions: Sacred Creativity*, ed. Stefania Palmisano and Nicola Pannofno (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), vi.

[107] Roger Finke and Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Supply-Side Explanations for Religious Change," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527, no. 1 (1993): 28.

[108] Olaf Schumann and Lode Frank Brakel, "Islam and Local Traditions: Syncretic Ideas and Practices," in *Islam in the World Today: A Handbook of Politics, Religion, Culture, and Society*, ed. Werner Ende and Udo Steinbach (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010), 779–780; Carl F Starkloff, *A Theology of the In-Between: The Values of Syncretic Prosess* (Marquette University Press, 2002), 11; Yulia Gavrilova et al., "Religious Syncretism as a Sociocultural Factor of Social Security in Cross-Border Regions," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 21, no. 3 (2018): 2–3, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2018.1460590; Dennis Galvan and Rudra Sil, "The Dilemma of Institutional Adaptation and the Role of Syncretism," in *Reconfiguring Institutions Across Time and Space: Syncretic Responses to Challenges of Political and Economic Transformation*, ed. Dennis Galvan and Rudra Sil (New York: Palgrave

account of steps to be taken in studying syncretism, based on ideas offered by several scholars collected in a volume *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader* (2014).[109] The first is "defining syncretism," which encompasses two different yet intimately related tasks: one task concerns the notion of syncretism, and the other task relates the phenomenon of syncretism.[110] Definitions are thus points of departure for arranging different subjects within an extensive analysis of syncretism, essential to sort out the "mal effects" of the discourses that have rendered the notion a tricky category for scientific use.

Concerning the relation of the phenomenon of syncretism to other phenomena that outline its "nature." We may divide our study of the nature of syncretism into three analytic levels that consider the divergence of the subject matter attached to the category. The first level is social, to which we may assign issues of power to syncretism. It also concerns the different politics and modes of religion about the encounter of religions and religious innovation. The second level is semiotic, wherein people must consider the hermeneutical and transformative impact that syncretistic formations have on religion. It has to do with the mechanisms of change and innovation in religious meaning, which many scholars refer to as the dynamics of syncretism. The third level is cognitive, the basic level underlying the two other levels. It explains the nature of conceptual blending and religious categorizing from the structure of human cognition, which may also help explain the transformative manner of "syncretistic semiotics" and the various constraints against syncretism in religious systems.

The two levels—the notion and the phenomenon—are interconnected in the same way as a "signifier" and the subject it "signifies" form a hermeneutic circle of referentiality: the notion, as a

MacMillan, 2007), 6.

[109] Leopold and Jensen, *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, 376–388.

[110] Leopold and Jensen, *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, 376.

concept, refers to something in the world of human affairs, which is going on whether we care or not, but we should never be able to talk about the goings-on if we did not have a concept that could hold together our thoughts and impressions.

Finally, there are three different theoretical outsets for defining syncretism, which roughly supports the distinction between the discursive level of explanation, the explanatory approach, and the historical, descriptive level of explanation. All three levels must be valid for clarifiying of the category syncretism because the category cannot be employed as part of a viable taxonomy if we disregard any of the levels.

The category of syncretism is a perfect example of how the "scale creates the phenomenon." This does not imply that the matters that make up the phenomenon created out of nothing, but simply that, with shifting taxonomies, we make different decisions about what "counts as" part of the phenomenon under investigation. Scholarly categories are also socio-cultural categories—they are, just like syncretism, "social facts" and made by humans. However they do "hook up to the real world," as we know it, so there is no cause for despair if neither the phenomena nor the categories are simple empirical or material objects. We may not have access to eternal verities, "God's-eye views," nor to things "in themselves," but we certainly can and should uphold the ideals of the validity of scholarly discourse. Only theoretical clarity and reflexivity will take us further on that path.

Conclusion

This article seeks to revisit the understanding of the concept of syncretist Javanese Islam by locating its conceptual origins, examining the scholarly accounts in academic literary production, and understanding the working of syncretist undertaking. It has demonstrated that intergenerational Western observers made the conception of syncretist Javanese Islam within the framework of essentially Christian theology. Its fundamental idea is the universality of religion, civilization evolution, hierarchical religions, and purity of religious doctrines. The result is that

Javanese Islam is a syncretic religion, not Islam, because it mixed up incompatible doctrines from different religions, some of which were mutually exclusive.

These early studies' evaluative and theological measures have also colored subsequent scholarly accounts of Javanese Islam, resulting in two opposing views revolving around whether Javanese Islam is genuinely Islamic. Equally theological in their approach, these studies also follow the steps of their predecessor, structuring Javanese Islam as consisting of belief and practice, analogous and parallel to Christianity. In so doing, the *slametan* and *ngelmu* posited as representing Javanese beliefs, as core ritual and its doctrine, respectively. However, this was a misrepresentation, stipulated in the absence of and contrary to Javanese self-description.

Concerning syncretism, it argues that Christian obsession with religious purity has resulted in the pejorative meaning of the term, even giving way to anti-syncretism. Provided the ubiquity of cultural encounters and thus of syncretism in human civilization, there is a need to rectify the attitude toward the term. However, the slippery meanings of the term and the complex syncretist process require a commitment to devising a more robust theoretical approach that potentially generates precise definitions and locates the relation of the phenomenon with the power structure, semiotic significance, and cognitive capacity of the syncretist agents. Only then the examination of syncretism human life can be taken reliably.

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