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ADAM AND EVE AND VISHNU: SYNCRETISM
IN THE JAVANESE SLAMETAN

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This article provides a fresh account of the Javanese slametan, or ritual meal, often said to be at the heart of Javanese popular religion. It shows how people of diverse ideology come together in ritual and, while apparently saying the same things, give expression to opposed views about God, revelation, Islam, and humankind's place in the cosmos. The case illuminates the ways in which ritual multivocality can be exploited in a culturally diverse setting, and sheds new light on a locus classicus of religious syncretism.

This article, in keeping with its theme, attempts to bring together certain theoretical issues under a common focus and to show an inner relation behind their diversity. The ethnographic focus is the Javanese slametan, or ritual meal. In analysing the slametan I hope to reveal systematic interconnexions between syncretism as a social process, the multivocality of ritual and the relation between local tradition and Islam.

Among the many intriguing aspects of ritual, polysemy or multivocality has proved a fertile source of theoretical debate and a continuing challenge to ethnographers. Leach (e.g. 1954: 86, 286) and Turner (1967), to name only two pioneers in this field, were both concerned in their different ways with how the ambiguity of ritual symbols related to variations and tensions in social structure. Ritual was to be seen as a 'language of argument, not a chorus of harmony' (Leach 1954: 278). Nevertheless, true to the inspiration of Durkheim, the terms of the argument were taken to be shared: they were collective representations, and what they represented was the social order (Leach 1954: 14).

Recent discussions of multivocality have placed a greater emphasis on the interplay between private, often idiosyncratic, interpretation and public constructions of ritual (Barth 1987), or on the individual's manipulation of symbolic meaning through 'implicature' or 'off record' significance (Strecke 1988). There has been a trend away from seeing ritual as 'symbolic consensus' (typically reflecting social processes) towards a greater recognition of the improvisatory, creative use of symbols and the 'fragmentation of meaning'. Humphrey and Laidlaw, to whom I owe these phrases (1994: 80), have emphasized the way in which individuals in a culturally complex setting draw on different sources of knowledge in construing ritual (1994: 202-4). They conclude, in terms which would have seemed startling not long ago: 'We can now see that variety, discordance and even absence of interpretation are all integral to ritual' (1994: 264).

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But problems concerning what kinds of interpretation are legitimate, whether symbols mean anything (let alone many things), and whether ritual can aptly be characterized as communication (see Lewis 1980; Sperber 1975) are diminished, or at least modified, when dealing with rituals in which speech is the principal medium. The Javanese slametan is exemplary in this respect. It is an extreme instance of 'ordered ambiguity' and is unusually explicit in that the multivocal elements are not simply actions or material symbols but words; moreover, words whose significance is spelled out in part during the performance. Since the burden of symbolic interpretation is shouldered by the participants themselves (I venture none of my own), the patterning of symbols is relatively conspicuous. And the social processes which give rise to this patterning (to revert to Durkheim) are, again, unusually clear: people of different orientations come together in a single ritual and manufacture consensus, or at least the appearance of it.

As I shall demonstrate, the significance of the slametan hinges on what participants make of certain key terms deriving from Islam. Some draw orthodox conclusions; others situate the Islamic terms in a Javanese cosmology or read them as universal human symbols. Yet all appear to be saying or endorsing the same thing. This unsuspected complexity undermines efforts to determine how far the slametan (and by extension Javanese religion) should be regarded as Islamic. But it also, happily, illuminates a critical function of symbolism in an ideologically diverse setting; namely, its capacity to focus diverse interests and thus to compel a collective respect. From this perspective, the multivocal symbol is itself revealed as an example and vehicle of syncretism.

I will first review discussion of the slametan and its place in Javanese religion before proceeding to an analysis of the rite as celebrated in Banyuwangi, East Java.

_The slametan in Javanese religion_

Most anthropologists of Java agree that the slametan lies at the heart of Javanese religion. It is surprising, then, that there are very few detailed descriptions in the literature and perhaps only one which carries conviction as an eye-witness report. Ever since the appearance of Geertz's (1960) classic work we have assumed we know what the slametan is. As is often the case in anthropology, one well-wrought account freezes discussion for a generation. Indeed, it was not until Hefner's (1985) admirable study of the Hindu Tenggerese of East Java that the subject was reopened.¹ An attempt to reconsider the slametan must therefore begin with the standard discussion.

Geertz opens his book with the claim that 'at the centre of the whole Javanese religious system lies a simple, formal, undramatic, almost furtive little ritual: the slametan' (1960: 11). He goes on to outline the elements essential to any slametan, whether it be held for a harvest, circumcision, or Islamic feast (1960: 11-15, 40-1). The host makes a speech in High Javanese explaining the purpose of the meal to his guests, incense is burned, an Arabic prayer is recited by the guests, and the special festive food is divided and consumed in part, the remainder being taken home. Typically, the speech invokes the host's ancestors, place spirits, Muslim saints, Hindu-Javanese heroes, and Adam and Eve in a polytheistic jumble seemingly designed to scandalize Muslim purists.
Whether the slametan, in this form, is really at the centre of the whole Javanese religious system, and whether there is in fact a whole Javanese religious system, are questions left unsettled. At any rate, Geertz blurs the issue by placing his description in a section devoted to peasant spirit beliefs, one of three variants in his total system.

Geertz’s view is that the Islamization of Java, begun in the thirteenth century, has been partial and variable. Pious Muslims, whom he calls santri, are concentrated along the northern coast, in rural areas where traditional Islamic schools are common, and among urban traders. The so-called abangan culture of the majority of peasants, though nominally Islamic, remains embedded in native Javanese ‘animism’ and ancestral tradition. The traditional, mainly urban, gentry, though also nominally Muslim, practise a form of mysticism deriving from the Hindu-Buddhist era preceding Islam in Java. These nobles-turned-bureaucrats, and those who adopt their lifestyle, are known as priyayi.

Later commentators have tinkered with the Geertzian terminology and found all kinds of subvarieties (Bachtar 1973; Ricklefs 1979). But the debate has moved on, and one trend has been to replace Geertz’s three dimensions of cultural variation with a starker dichotomy based on degree of participation in Islam (Koentjaraningrat 1985: 317; cf. Hefner 1985: 3-4, 107; 1987: 534; Stange 1986: 106). The high culture that Geertz calls priyayi and the native peasant tradition are subsumed under a single term kejawen (or equivalent), meaning Javanism. Kejawen is then opposed to the Islamic piety of the santri. Woodward (1988; 1989), who has employed this opposition most extensively, has given the terms of debate a further twist by claiming that Javanist religion, in both its popular and mystical forms, is basically an adaptation of Sufism. The dichotomy of kejawen and santri thus refers to a division within Islam. Hence, for Woodward too, Javanese religion is one; but the unifying factor is Islam, not, as Geertz would have it, Java.

Woodward’s thesis exemplifies a recent tendency in Southeast Asian studies (e.g. Bowen 1993; Roff 1985) to redress a scholarly bias based on a liberal antipathy for Islam. He argues that ‘the slametan is the product of the interpretation of Islamic texts and modes of ritual action shared by the larger (non-Javanese) Muslim community’ (1988: 62); and that the slametan, at least in Central Java, is not especially or even primarily a village ritual but is modelled on the imperial cult of the court of Yogyakarta, which he sees as Sufi in inspiration (1988: 85). This scripturalist, top-down view of village ritual is contrary to that of Geertz, for whom the slametan (the ‘core ritual’ of Javanese religion) is rooted in peasant animist tradition.

There is much more to Javanese religion than slametans, but if we accept their centrality, this is as good a place as any on which to begin a rethinking. I want to shift the scene, however, away from the well-known heartland of Java to Banyuwangi at its eastern extremity. This was the setting of the kingdom of Blambangan, the last region of Java to be Islamized and still, reportedly, Hindu in parts well into the nineteenth century (Arps 1992: 116). Although Banyuwangi is only three miles across the straits from Hindu Bali, the cultural mix is still much closer to the rest of Java. A recent visitor has characterized the region as ‘strongly Islamic’ (Arps 1992: 116),
The slametan in Banyuwangi resembles, in essentials, those described elsewhere in Java. There is the incense, the parade of offerings, the speech of dedication (spoken by a delegate, not the host as reported for other localities), and the prayers. Superficially, there is an impression of uniformity and simplicity, as has been noted elsewhere (Hefner 1985: 107; Jay 1969: 209). But the impression is deceptive. For the participants in this ritual, though almost all peasants, hold strikingly different views of its meaning. Indeed, as religious orientations, we find all three of Geertz's variants, and combinations thereof, present in the same event. It is as if the pious trader, the animist farmer and the mystic were seated at the same meal and obliged to talk about the very thing that divides them. What could they possibly have in common? And what keeps their passionately held differences from erupting in discord?

**Description of slametan**

Let me begin, then, with a description of a slametan. In Banyuwangi the slametan is specifically a rite for the living, distinct from prayer meals for the dead *(sedhekah).*

In general terms, the purpose of the slametan is to create a state of well-being, security and freedom from hindrances of both a practical and spiritual kind—a state which is called slamet. Although the word *slamet* can be used of the dead (in the sense of ‘saved’), I was told on several occasions that the word *slametan* is inappropriate if used of funeral feasts, amounting to a solecism. Specific reasons for holding slametans include the celebration of rites of passage, harvests, a wish to restore harmony after a marital quarrel or a bad dream, to safeguard a new motorbike, and to redeem a vow. But often, there is no ostensible reason other than that one seeks the desired state of well-being.

The slametan takes place just after dark in the front room of the house. A long rectangular mat is laid out, with a set of offerings at one end. Cigarettes, flowers and a packet of face powder lie on a pillow placed at the head of the mat, with other offerings to either side. On the right (‘male’) side is a flask of water; on the left (‘female’) side a brass betel set; and in front, a small lamp, a coin, a dish containing five blobs of porridge in different colours, quids of betel, a dish of red porridge with a drop of white in the middle, and a glass of water containing red, yellow and white petals. The types of food spread out along the mat depend on the occasion. Often there is a large cone of rice, resting on briars in a basket, called the ‘mound of misfortune’ *(tumpeng serakat)*; a chicken is buried in another mound; and there are packages of glutinous rice in tubes and diamond shapes.

Dressed soberly in sarongs and black velvet hats, men arrive from all the nearby houses, the number of guests depending on the importance and elaborateness of the slametan. When they are all seated cross-legged around the mat, the banana leaves covering the food are removed and the host fetches a small clay brazier containing glowing embers. He places it before a guest seated nearest the offerings and tells him quietly the purpose of the feast. The delegate then crumbles incense onto the embers and, as the aromatic smoke starts to rise, he addresses the other guests solemnly, beginning with the Islamic greeting. I quote one such address (abbreviated here) recorded in August 1992.
Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh

Thanks to you gentlemen who are present today to witness this act; I am merely conveying the wishes of our hosts Sukib and Sumi and family. Let the intention/slametan³ (ajur) be jointly witnessed and prayed for from our sincere hearts so that it be granted. Their intention, namely, is to glorify and restore to its pristine state the whole body, and to glorify their siblings born on the same day, elder sibling amniotic fluid and younger sibling placenta. May these two people, Sukib and Sumi, be guarded day and night by their siblings. The stipulations have all been fulfilled such that there is red and white porridge, acknowledging that one possesses Mother Earth and Father Power, Father Day and Mother Night, taking the form of Mother Eve and Father Adam. May the actions of Sukib and Sumi and their family, young and old, male and female, be safeguarded northwards, southwards, eastwards and westwards; may they be confirmed and prosper. There is five-coloured porridge: red, yellow, white, black, and green, dedicated to their four wise siblings of many colours, the fifth being oneself. There is savoury rice which Sukib and Sumi give to their guide, the Lord Muhammad Rasulullah, may the blessing of Allah be upon him. May Sukib and Sumi receive his mercy and that of the Prophet's Companions. There are yellow wengi leaves, forty-four in number, for the forty-four angels guarding Sukib and Sumi day and night; ... fragrant water so that they acknowledge the body and supplicate to the Lord Almighty. There is packaged rice acknowledging that they possess nine saints guarding the nine holes of the body. ... The rice cone of misfortune, this too is part of their slametan, may the misfortune be lost and the slamet remain, ... Let this be witnessed by the Lord and his Prophet.

The speaker, or whoever is able, then begins a short praise of Muhammad followed by a recitation of the opening of the Qur'an in which all join, and then a specific Arabic prayer for welfare (do'a slamet) to which all say Amin.

This done, the meal begins, each person helping himself from the array of food. The host stands by, encouraging guests to try all the dishes. He alone may not eat; it is his offering. In contrast to other parts of Java, the guests eat to their satisfaction and there is no division of the leftovers. Instead, when the men have departed the women and children come in and, with much less decorum, devour the rest. But before they leave, the men drink coffee and smoke clove cigarettes from among the offerings. Conversation is amicable and good-humoured, and when they get up to shake the host's hand, saying, 'May your wish be granted', between half an hour and an hour may have passed.

I have described the basic sequence of speech and action in the slametan. Many such feasts have more elaborate forms demanded by the occasion and are inserted into complex ritual sequences: for example, at a housewarming. But I am concerned here with general features of the slametan. What, then, can one conclude from this bare description?

One feature that strikes the anthropologist who has worked on ritual elsewhere in Indonesia is the studied explicitness of the slametan. The only unexplained, uncompromised element is the Arabic prayer. It is important to note, also, that the guests are present not as a passive audience but as witnesses (seksi) validating the reiterated intentions of the host and as participants in the prayer. Their sincere assent is required and each phrase of symbolic explication is followed by a collective 'Yes'. One could hardly find a more emphatic demonstration of cultural uniformity and social harmony than this oath-like performance. It is all the more surprising, then, that each element of the event, from the moment the incense is lit to the parting handshake, has a disputed meaning; or rather has a range of meanings which variously contradict, complement, or nest inside each other. These variant readings are not the quibbles of specialists over the finer points of tradition; they reflect differences of worldview
so radical that they overturn conventional wisdom on the slametan and confound some of our expectations about ritual action. A few of the participants believe that a Transcendent and Unknowable God created man and sent down the Qur’ân to Muhammad as his sole guide, and that man’s preordained actions lead inexorably to heaven or hell. A few others disbelieve in any kind of afterlife, and question the idea of a personal God, the absolute truth of the Qur’ân, and the divine mission of Muhammad. The remainder—perhaps a small majority, though proportions vary—believe in the continued existence of ancestors and perhaps in some form of karma, but not in a Muslim afterlife. But they all pronounce the same words. What, then, do they mean by them?

Sources of tradition reflected in the slametan

Before I try to answer this question I must indicate the sources of these disparate forms of knowledge. Unlike the better-known case of Central Java, the Dutch conquest of Blambangan in the late eighteenth century led to the total destruction of the kingdom and the depopulation of whole areas (Kumar 1979: 191-2; Lekkerkerker 1923: 1064). The court culture vanished and, although a few literary chronicles of the period survived, there is no indigenous high culture comparable to that of Yogyakarta and Solo since there was no aristocracy to maintain one. In comparative terms this had several implications at village level. First of all, there was no court-country polarity, no elevated urban model of manners and ideas to emulate. In fact, there was nothing, politically or culturally, between the village and the colonial state, just so many peasant communities each with its own local traditions. Crucially, there was no unifying religious or cultural authority similar to the Muslim states of Central Java. When Islam came it was at the behest of the Dutch anxious to ward off Balinese political influence (Pigeaud 1932: 253; Stoppelaar 1927: 6). The piecemeal Islamization of the region has also come about through the settling of large numbers of Madurese labourers and peasant farmers from elsewhere in east Java. The Islam they brought was a simple, unreflective faith—the Islam of pesantren, old-fashioned rural seminaries where village boys memorized the Qur’ân and magical formulae for healing. Modernist Islam, represented by the Muhammadiyah organization, has not made a big impact in the countryside.

So much for the priyayi and santri. What, then, of native Banyuwangi village traditions? Here, too, one is hard put to define a distinct regional style—that is, innumerable small local differences, a greater emphasis on kinship values, and a more egalitarian ethos. The indigenous people are among very few populations in Java to have a distinct name, the Osing or Jawa Osing; but they remain a part of the wider Javanese civilization. What defines the region culturally for outsiders is its performing arts—strongly influenced by Bali—and the dialect. Cara Osing, as it is called, lacks the intricate speech levels of standard Javanese. A form of High Javanese called besiki is rarely spoken except in slametans, in which it is used in the dedication.

To bring this brief cultural history up to date, there have been several developments in the religious make-up of the region since Independence in 1949. Alongside a steady drive for Islamic conformity and piety there have been two movements away from Islam, both of them given a large impetus by the events of the late 1960s when the Left in Indonesia was crushed. These are the rise of
Javanist mysticism and large-scale conversions to Hinduism. In the case of mysticism, one particular sect has developed deep roots and indirectly stimulated a re-evaluation of local tradition; in the case of Hinduism, converts have sought to restore what they see as the original and true religion of Java, and have adapted local traditions accordingly. In parts of Banyuwangi there are now Hindu as well as Muslim slametans.

The mystical sect, which I shall call 'The Way of Perfection', is based in the Banyuwangi regency but has adherents, numbering a few thousand, all over East Java. The regional leader happens to live in 'Sukosari', the village where I stayed. This village of over two thousand souls has had followers now for two generations and about one fifth of its adult inhabitants are members. Unusually, then, for Java, this is a mystical association based in the countryside and far away from the old kingdoms. The Way of Perfection follows the teachings of an aristocratic wanderer, a half-legendary figure who died in 1956. One of his former incarnations, it is said, was Sêh Siti Jenar, a Javanese heretic who, like the Persian martyr al-Hallaj, declared 'I am the Reality', suggesting a monism disallowed by Islamic orthodoxy (Schimmel 1975: 55, 72; Zoetmulder 1995: 300-8). Most of the older members in Sukosari were personally initiated by the founder and knew him face to face. However, the sect is not based on a personality cult; it espouses a practical philosophy rooted in Javanese tradition. As such it translates easily into the village context, availing itself of the symbolism to hand. For the village mystics, the sect provides a philosophical justification of what they have always practised, an answer to orthodox Islam, and a means of understanding experience and one's place in the world.

So far I have given a bare description of the slametan, pointed to three variant readings of the ritual and briefly sketched in the historical background of this variation. Let us now look more closely at the slametan, so as to understand how these diverse interpretations are made.

**Interpretation of the slametan**

Incense is referred to in the invocation as holy rice (*sekol suci*). It is what the ancestors and spirits eat along with the smells of the offerings and food, the essence of the feast. Some participants believe the ancestral spirits to be present at the gathering, attracted by the incense and flowers. The incense also serves as a vehicle for the words. Communication between the coarse, material (*kasar*) world and the refined, spiritual (*alus*) realm is difficult, so we convey wishes with incense and symbolic offerings.

The speaker's first words are the Arabic customary greeting, directed both to the guests and the unseen spirits. He continues in Javanese, either High Javanese (*krama*) if he is able, or in the Osing dialect interlaced with phrases of village *krama*. (Most key terms in the address are common to both speech levels.) He addresses the guests as siblings or kinsmen, though most in fact are not kin. Even among pious villagers, the concept of the Islamic community of believers, the *umma*, has little significance, and the Indonesian word *umat* is hardly ever used in any village context, though it is familiar from radio broadcasts. What unites the guests is a momentary fictional kinship which signifies both common background and common humanity; any notion of a community of the faithful would only draw attention to the differences among participants.
The speaker then identifies his own role, saying that he is merely passing on certain wishes as an intermediary. His disclaimer draws attention to the traditional status of his words—that they express ancient wisdom, not his own ideas. True knowledge is timeless and cannot originate with an individual. By contrast, Islam is historically bounded and recent. While santri like to point out that Muhammad was the last of the prophets and therefore the purveyor of the most complete and perfect revelation, in the eyes of the less devout this makes his revelation new-fangled and derivative.

The speaker then casts his eye down the array of offerings and festive dishes and refers to them one by one, in no fixed order, giving a formulaic explanation of their meaning. There can be twenty or more items, though on average there are about a dozen. One of the purposes of the address is to enumerate and display to the spirits what is on offer; the speech is intended for them as well as for the living witnesses. The deceased are jealous of the living and are apt to frustrate them if not properly acknowledged. Each element must be individually dedicated on behalf of the hosts, specifying their names or stipulating, like the small print of an insurance policy, that male and female, young and old, and those on both sides of the family, are included in the dedication. Among the mystics the naming of parts has a further purpose. To name something is to attest to its existence. Since we cannot affirm what we cannot perceive or know through intuitive feeling (rasa), the existence of the phenomenal world depends in some sense on our perceiving it. The enumeration of symbolic foods and the realities to which they refer is therefore, for those initiated, a kind of metaphysical contemplation of what there is.

Among the most important items are the red and white porridge and the dish of five-coloured porridge. A brief comment on their range of meanings will give some idea of the symbolic scope of the slametan. Red and white are primary symbols in Javanese thought. In the slametan, white and red porridge represent respectively the father’s semen and the mother’s procreative blood and, through them, Adam and Eve, our first parents. Other oppositions, such as day and night or right and left, may be linked in the address with this primordial pair. All this is explicit and generally agreed. The importance of filial piety, linked as it is to the sources of fortune and misfortune, can hardly be exaggerated. For many ordinary villagers filiation is the dominant theme and motivation of the slametan, with the understanding that in acknowledging one’s deceased parents one safeguards oneself. A minimal slametan, in fact, consists only of the red and white porridge.

Others place the emphasis differently. Pious Muslims look beyond the parental symbols to Adam and Eve as historical figures, Nabi Adam being the first prophet. For the mystics, Adam is Everyman. Each man contains the seed of humanity in his sperm. Hence, nabi (prophet) ‘means’ bibit (seed). Adam and Eve, like our immediate parents, are mere intermediaries (lantaran), not the original source of life and wisdom. For the mystics, the scriptural account of creation is a humanly-invented story to be mined for symbolism and fitted to what we can know directly from ourselves, the only true source of knowledge. At the risk of overschematizing, one might say that the santri reads into the symbols an Islamic cosmogony; the ordinary indifferent villager places them in a familial context; and the mystic refers everything back to the self.
The formulaic interpretations in the address thus mask divergent positions and motivations. Of these, the two extremes, the mystical and the santri, are the clearest and most articulate, with the majority falling somewhere in between. It is the mystics who go furthest, by far, in developing these ideas, in smoke-filled, all-night sessions.

I will give a brief example related to the symbolism so far considered. In the teaching of the sect, Adam and Eve, or male and female, each contributes four things in conception. From the father derive the four white constituents (which need not be named here), from the mother the red. But since not every act of sex leads to conception, for life to exist there must be a third admixture, and this is divine. The mystics refer to this third ingredient by a variety of terms: the Hidden (ga’ib), Life (urip), Wisnu (Vishnu), or Power (kwaso). As they put it, ‘the Arabic word is Allah’ though, of course, this is not what most people understand by Allah. The duality of red and white therefore implies a trinity: Adam and Eve and Wisnu. The third part of the trinity, the divine spark, is (or some say results from) the confluence of the four elements, earth, wind, fire and water, and these elements continually renew and sustain life.

How much of this is spelt out in the address depends on the speaker and the audience. Some of the number sets, such as the four material elements, have a wide currency, but only those who have studied mysticism understand the interrelation between the sets. Ordinary villagers, and even santri, will sometimes refer to a concept of three-in-one, symbolized by the three coloured flowers, without being clear about what they mean by this. But whereas ordinary folk will often refer to one of the mystics for an authoritative interpretation, the santri rarely do so and simply claim that it is all there in the Koran if only one knows where to look (which in fact no-one does). In general, the explicit interpretation contained in the address is, to use a somewhat untropical trope, the tip of the iceberg.

The most interesting feature of the slametan symbolism from a theoretical point of view is not simply that it is polysemic in the manner of Turner’s (1967) colour symbolism: we are now familiar enough with the idea of a symbol having layered and even contradictory meanings in different contexts among people who share a common ideology. I am describing something more complex: ideological diversity contained within a common frame.

A parallel case is that of the kenduri, or prayer-meal, of the Sumatran Gayo (Bowen 1993: 229-50). In a penetrating analysis, Bowen shows how factional differences between modernist and traditionalist Muslims are muted in the kenduri. As in the slametan, ritual ambiguity is exploited – though in quite different ways – to enable people of diverse orientation to come together. In the Gayo case the risk of conflict is reduced by ‘a compartmentalization of the ritual [which] allows people to acknowledge some of its components and ignore others’ (Bowen 1993: 241). Controversial parts of Gayo ritual are performed privately by specialists (1993: 317). Equally important, at a kenduri ‘no public decoding takes place, and people draw their own semiotic conclusions’ (1993: 232). Community is thus maintained in spite of ideological differences.

It is the unsaid, the underinterpreted, the absence of exegesis at the event itself that permits ritual practitioners to reconstruct community on top of a wide diversity of individual opinions about what is ritually proper and practically possible (Bowen 1993: 318).
Likewise, among the Tenggerese of East Java:

No sermon accompanies ceremony, and no one comes forth to provide ‘item-by-item exegesis’ of ritual symbolism. Often the priest celebrates communal rites alone ... The efficacy of ritual rarely depends upon the presence of an active congregation (Hefner 1985: 20).

Consequently, ‘ritual social organization in Tengger buffers the liturgy from popular regard, helping to maintain two almost parallel bodies of ritual symbolism, each internally consistent and sustained in its own field’ (Hefner 1985: 186; see also pp. 18, 184-8, 269). Against these characterizations (which fit many Southeast Asian cases) the example presented here appears in sharp contrast – a contrast all the more striking given family resemblances among the rituals concerned. Instead of separation, specialization and an avoidance of public speech, we find in the Banyuwangi slametan a systematic integration of very disparate ideas in a fully collective enterprise. Public exegesis forms a key part, and social compromise is achieved not merely in spite of ideological differences but by means of their combined expression in ritual.4

Perhaps this is clearer in my second example, the five-coloured porridge. In the address it refers to the dulur papat limo badan, literally the ‘siblings-four five-body (self)’. The four siblings are the personal guardian spirits, important in magic and protection from sorcery (see Weiss 1977). Usually only two are named: the amniotic fluid and afterbirth, respectively elder and younger sibling to the person, and these stand for the set of four. The dulur are represented, then, by a dish containing four blobs of rice porridge oriented to the cardinal points, with black to the north, red south, yellow west and white east. In the centre is a blob of green porridge or a mixture of the other four, manca warna, ‘multicoloured’. The centre stands, explicitly, for the person, the focus and origin of the four directions. Hence the phrase: ‘siblings four, body (or self) fifth’.

In the dedication, the four-five configuration is linked to other sets, such as the elements, and to Islamic quartets, such as the four drives, the archangels, and the Companions of the Prophet; though not to quintets such as the five daily prayers or the pillars of the faith, which lack reference to a central component.

As with the red and white porridge, a publicly agreed formula is given differential emphasis in private or esoteric interpretations. For the ordinary participant, the four spiritual siblings are primary, and are assumed, like the ancestral spirits, to have a direct influence on one’s welfare. Many santri share this view, but play up the Islamic parallels when pressed in discussion. Typically, it is the mystics who go furthest in systematizing and elaborating the correspondences. For the mystics, at one level of exegesis, the four siblings represent the four faculties under the control of rasa, ‘intuitive feeling’ (Stange 1984: 119), located in the centre (solar plexus). Rasa is synonymous with indwelling divine life, and it is in rasa that outer and inner, man and God are united (Geertz 1960: 238-40; Stange 1984; Zoetmulder 1995: 182-4).

A scheme widely shared among people of different orientation is that of microcosm and macrocosm, denoted in Javanese by the terms jagad cilik and jagad gedhé. The four-five configuration is one of the structures which links these two realms.5 Man is composed of the four elements and returns to these at death; man is the centre from which the four directions radiate, and so on.
The centre represents the whole in two senses (both explanations are offered): either as encompassing the outer components or as being their combination — hence the multicoloured blob. But, again, explicit interpretation is limited. The formal speech merely points to correspondences between various sets of four without specifying the nature of their links. Are microcosm and macrocosm connected by analogy, metaphor or identity of substance? Clearly the answers to this question sort out the sheep from the goats, doctrinally. Santris would not accept the mystics’ anthropocentrism — their identification of the archangels with the faculties, nor the identity of God and man in nasa, the central component; nor would the average villager accept that the ancestors are in oneself or that Adam and Eve are purely symbolic figures. But since these ideas are not spelled out in the address there is no problem.

As will be evident by now, numerology serves various ends in the slamanetan. Firstly, it creates a framework on which interpretations of differing cast can be pinned. All agree on the importance of the four-sibling set, but some go on to link this with the four passions, others the four elements. It does not greatly matter since each set can symbolize the others. One set can be primary and in some sense real, the other derivative or merely symbolic, depending on one’s point of view. The particular meanings are not exclusive. On the contrary, rather than reject a rival interpretation (so far as it is known), one fits it into one’s conceptual scheme at a different level.

Another technique of explication is by a form of word play called kétra basa. Here, one takes some word or syllable and either constructs an etymology or finds in one’s scheme some key word with which it rhymes. The word is then taken to have this meaning. One example already given is nabi (prophet). Its second syllable -bi is found (almost) in bibit, seed, so nabi ‘means’ (tegesé) seed. Sego golong, the packaged rice, rhymes with bolong, hole; thus, commonly, signifying the nine orifices of the body. The orifices in turn are guarded by (or, for some, merely symbolize) the nine saints credited with spreading Islam in Java. This much is common knowledge. But for the mystics these quasi-historical personages are merely symbols in turn: waliyullah, saint or friend of God, rhymes with and ‘means’ polah (action/doing) a key term in their ethical system.

Kétra basa, like numerology, is a way of connecting diverse realms and establishing correspondences. Perhaps one should say it is a means of recognizing correspondences, since many of these are felt to be real, not imagined (cf. Keeler 1987: 251-3). In fact, the goal of much mystical discussion is to reveal the interconnectedness of things, to realize that ‘the cosmos is one community’ (Pigeaud 1983: 65). Both techniques of interpretation — numerology and kétra basa — have the effect of synthesizing or syncretizing disparate materials by identifying common denominators. This procedure also permits a divergence of opinion and interpretation within a common ritual language.

Perhaps the most extreme example of this phenomenon is the term Muhammad Rasulullah: ‘Muhammad the Apostle of God’. The mere utterance of the epithet is enough to identify the speaker as a Muslim. But what kind of Muslim? The word ‘Muhammad’ in Arabic script looks like, or can be perceived as, a human body lying on its side. This conceit, which features in other Javanese mystical systems as well as in classical Sufism (Schimmel 1975: 153), is related by adepts to the notion that the body is a script, a ‘wet book’ (kitab teles) in
contrast to the dry book of the Qur’ān. (It also fits neatly with the distinction in Islam between nabi [prophet] and rasul [apostle, bearer of a holy book]). The body’s script is eternal, unlike the temporal revelation of the historical Muhammad. The script is reproduced in each generation, our bodies being the intermediaries, to be read and interpreted anew by those with a mind to it. One does not need to look outside oneself for illumination. Hence, for the mystics, the slametan, in its details and as a whole, is a meditation on the human body, the self: as microcosm, as intermediary, and as the source of knowledge. The ancestors, Adam and Eve, the four siblings and Muhammad are all in oneself. Rasul, apostle, in this serious play of words, means rasa, the divine faculty of feeling-perception. So when the address closes with the words, ‘May this be granted by Muhammad the apostle of God’, simple monotheists, near-polytheists and mystics hovering somewhere between pantheism and a sceptical humanism can nod in unison.

That the slametan comprises disparate meanings is itself a matter of varying interpretation. Santri relativize Javanist knowledge as a matter of adat or custom, something inferior to the universal truths of religion. The mystics, for their part, sometimes refer to the stages of the Sufi path. Knowledge attained in the final stage, gnosis, may be so far removed from the first stage that it appears to contradict it. But esoteric knowledge is never brought into open comparison with common knowledge except among adepts. I found that pious Muslims in the village knew little of Javanist metaphysics beyond a travesty of the identification of God and man. But many of the mystics were among the more knowledgeable about Islam and could recite the prayers proficiently. This puts them at an advantage in debate and is one reason why santri are reluctant to quibble with arcane words like Wisnu that may crop up in slametans. The quiet, bewildered majority caught between the two sides is apt to defer to either as the occasion demands. But while ordinary villagers might side with the santri because they feel they ought to, they defer to the mystics because they believe them to be in possession of the truth. In this practical distinction between what is respectable or politically safe and what is ultimately true, many, perhaps the majority, of villagers tacitly accept the mystics’ frame of reference.

To sum up, however sharp the disagreements may be, they are hidden in the slametan by several factors: the ambiguous phrasing of the address; a refusal to contest meanings in public; a relativism which grants a limited truth to the other’s view; and a recognition of common social values and common humanity which override doctrinal differences.

I have concentrated on some details of the slametan dedication in order to reveal the wide variation in meaning contained in what appears to be, to quote again Geertz’s (1960: 11) characterization, ‘a simple, formal, undramatic … little ritual’. Before turning to the social context of the ritual, which again is deceptively simple, I want briefly to consider some linguistic aspects of the slametan.

The discourse of the slametan

Whether the ancestors and other spirits actually hear the address and the prayers is a matter of muted controversy. Ancestors are said to ‘have returned to eternity’ (mulih nang [nèng] jaman kelangengan), an ambiguous phrase which can mean ‘reunited with God in heaven’, ‘mouldering in the graveyard’, or simply
‘extinct’. Depending on one’s preferred eschatology, the formal speech is therefore a direct address to disembodied spirits, a message to be passed on by intermediaries to God, or a reflective contemplation. Since the audience is mixed, it has to be all of these things at the same time.

The significance of the invocatory speech as a whole is judged in relation to the prayer that follows it (cf. Bowen 1993: 230-1). For the pious, orthodox-leaning Muslim, the invocation is less important because the role of the ancestors is ancillary – they are intermediaries with God, not a source of blessing in themselves. The prayer is more powerful because it goes directly to God; moreover, Arabic is God’s language.

For Javanists, in contrast, Arabic words frame the more important Javanese speech, like a vessel protecting a precious content. In the same way, official religion is the wadhah or container of the esoteric truths of Javanist philosophy. The power of the vernacular words resides partly in the fact that they are pronounced clearly, understood, and witnessed, in contrast to the opaque Arabic words which are merely garbled. The Javanese words of the address, moreover, are tuvèk, ancient and replete with wisdom and power. They pertain to mysteries – the realm of eternity, origins and destinations.

As powerful speech, the address is said to be mandi, a word which refers both to verbal efficacy and, curiously, to the potency of venom. (To break one’s word is ‘to incur its poison’.) Like a spell, the address is a performative utterance which acts on the world, achieving its end in the saying (cf. Austin 1970; Tambiah 1985).

**Personnel**

According to reports from elsewhere in Java, it is the mosque official (modin) or some similar figure who presides at a slamen. In Banyuwangi, everything points away from a religious specialization in the office and there is no ‘ritual dependency’ (Hefner 1985: 107) on the pious. The modin only presides if he happens to figure among the usual guests and if there is no-one senior or more skilful in performing the address. The host’s delegate is not therefore a token Muslim among the heathens, as is sometimes alleged, but is much like the other guests. The speaker does not even have to be a highly respected or moral person. In any neighbourhood there are one or two men who possess the necessary knowledge and are usually called upon. One man may speak the address and another the prayer, or one person may perform the whole ceremony. Although each speaker has his personal style, certain elements are standard. The prayers are – errors aside – invariable and are learned from manuals or by repetition from a teacher.

A crucial point for the sociology of the slamen is that the content of the address is roughly the same whatever the religious orientation of the speaker. The emphasis varies but nobody imposes a private interpretation or bias in the explicit form of the speech. Neither can one elaborate at will: the formulized meanings are traditional and independent of the speaker. Just as the speaker must be neutral in composing the address, the host’s choice of delegate does not usually indicate an ideological bias on his part. On the contrary, he may ask a neighbour of an opposite tendency to speak. One pious Muslim told me he would like to dispense with the address and go straight to the prayers. His
next-door neighbour is a prominent mystic who regards Islam with some hostility as a ‘colonization of the soul’. As a guest, on more than one occasion I witnessed each man preside at the slametan of the other. The santri would do without the address, the mystic would do without the prayer; but each performed the whole sequence for the benefit of his host and the group of guests.

Here we come to the social value of the slametan as distinct from its symbolic meanings. While the invocation speaks of the person and the world, saying very little of the community, the performance of slametans is recognized as having wider social benefits. Among other things, it promotes a state of rukun among participants (Geertz 1960: 61). Rukun, which means both social harmony and the making of such harmony, is the prime social value in village life. In everyday affairs it is achieved by the mutual adjustment of differing interests among fellow villagers. In the slametan, rukun is enhanced by several means, the first being the fact of taking part. Participation implies sharing the joys or sorrows of the occasion; it also requires a contribution to the costs and labour of a major feast, and ultimately a return invitation. Significantly, recruitment is impartial: guests are not chosen on the basis of group identity, personal preference, or like-mindedness; they are either neighbours or kin as the occasion demands. Secondly, rukun is achieved by the form of the slametan itself, which is, as we have seen, a temporary synthesis of disparate elements and ideologies. A symbolic compromise mirrors – indeed, effects – a social compromise. Syncretism is therefore to be seen in this case as a dynamic social and cultural process, not as a mere historical concretion of bits and pieces left over from Java’s chequered past. The need for rukun motivates participation in the slametan; and the syncretism of the slametan transforms ideological difference into rukun.¹⁰

Is the slametan Islamic?

As I noted at the outset, discussion of the slametan, and of Javanese religion in general, has been preoccupied with whether or not, or to what extent, it is Islamic. It should be clear by now that this question cannot be answered simply by a description of what happens and comparison against a checklist of Islamic rules and customs. Unlike Woodward (1988: 62), I could find no-one who regarded the slametan (distinct from the sedhekah) as an Islamic ritual. Anthropologists may indeed have been misled by a narrowly legalistic definition of Islam, as Woodward asserts, but then so have the Javanese themselves. Though it obviously incorporates Islamic elements, most people regard the slametan as authentically Javanese and pre-Islamic or even Hindu in inspiration. Islamic terms have been appropriated and in some cases given senses wholly different from anything recognizably Muslim, or else emptied of specifically Islamic content by turning them into universal symbols. ‘We all practise Islam’, as one mystic told me, ‘even you, because Islam means slamet, something we all seek’. Even the Javanese word for the salat ritual prayer, sembahyang is deconstructed and becomes sembah eyang, worship of one’s ancestors (variously conceived). It seems inadequate therefore to view this kind of thinking as a local form of Islam. On the contrary, many regard Islam as a local form of ‘true’ knowledge. It is given a place, but an inferior one, in the total scheme of things.

What matters primarily for an understanding of ritual is, in any case, the significance derived by participants themselves. The putative textual origins of
the slametan or its parallels in other Muslim societies have little bearing on its contemporary significance. A case in point is the slametan address, the *kabul*. In Islamic law the term *kabul* is paired with *ijab* as the formal ‘acceptance’ of an ‘offer’ made in a legal contract before witnesses (Juyboll 1953: 157). Is the slametan therefore construed as a contractual exchange with the ancestors or God? Perhaps. But so are ritual meals the world over. The textual Islamic origin, if such it is, and the legal connotations, have been forgotten. Intriguingly, in standard Javanese the slametan address is called *ujub* (from Arabic *ijab*), not *kabul*. The Osing substitution of a speech of ‘acceptance’ for one of ‘offering’ suggests a ‘magical’, coercive emphasis, a recasting of what was already a borrowed notion.

Evidently the Islamic nature of the ritual cannot be settled by etymology, scriptural derivation, or even the opinion of participants. For who is to say, ultimately, what counts as Islamic? There are, moreover, slametans in Banyuwangi which lack any Islamic reference. In the village of Cungking there is a popular cult of a sage associated with the last Hindu-Buddhist (*buda*) king in Java (d. 1691). Slametans at his shrine involve archaic *buda* spells instead of Arabic prayers or greetings. Further south, in the village of Kedunen, Hindu converts and their Muslim neighbours regularly attend each other’s slametans. There is the usual incense-burning (joss-sticks for Hindus, resin for Muslims), the speech of invocation and symbolic explication, and the prayers. Naturally, one keeps a respectful silence during prayers of the opposite faith. But the formal address is remarkably similar in each case. The offerings are the same but there are differences in the glosses; for example, instead of dedicating the chicken to Muhammad one dedicates it to Resi Wiyasa, a parallel figure who reputedly brought Hinduism to Java. Root vegetables normally dedicated to Suleiman are offered to Antaboga, the underworld serpent. But, strikingly, many of the elements remain the same for both Hindus and Muslims – the red and white symbolism and the five-coloured porridge, the three coloured flowers and fragrant water. These are, as we have seen, the essential ingredients of the slametan in Sukosari.

**Conclusion**

Studies of multivocality in relatively closed, ideologically simple settings (notably Barth 1987 and Strecke 1988), stress the freedom of actors to manipulate meanings to their political advantage; but in a complex and diverse setting multivocality may, on the contrary, serve as a means of blending together dissonant voices and thus of orchestrating social harmony. Symbols, in this perspective, work as common denominators rather than as indexes of difference – the more ambiguous (polysemic), the more resonant and focal the symbol, and the greater its integrative power. This does not, of course, mean that the slametan is all things to all people. For a given group of celebrants it is a fairly specific embodiment of their various views: otherwise it would lose its relevance to their ultimate concerns. As Empson (1930) famously showed, ambiguity can function with some precision when employed as a stylistic device; and so it does in this case. The symbolic range of the slametan, far from being unlimited, is specified by traditional interpretative techniques and by reference to restricted sets of ideas. Social and political constraints (which are
apt to change) determine which meanings shall be voiced and which shall remain implicit.

I have suggested a connexion between multivocality and syncretism. If people of different orientation are to come together, as they do in the slaman, they must create common ground, discover both what unites them and what can focus their divergent interests. This they do by means of multivocal symbols. The resulting synthesis is, as we have seen, a temporary accommodation in which participants are not required to abandon their positions and think alike. Nobody subscribes to the whole package of ideas associated with the slaman; and nobody rejects outright a rival interpretation. Moreover, underneath the differences there are commonalities – a sense of common humanity, a need for *nikun*, a desire to share in the occasion.

The enduring quality of the slaman no doubt derives partly from its appeal to basic Javanese values which transcend local and sectarian differences. It brings together neighbours as fellow men and women, not as fellow Muslims or Hindus. But its form – symbolically dense and comprehensive but at the same time flexible and ambiguous – has also helped it to survive and even encompass major cultural changes (cf. Lewis 1980: 8-9). The very adaptability of the slaman has made conversion from Islam to Hinduism and sometimes back again less troublesome than one might imagine. As a ritual frame adaptable to diverse faiths and ideologies it remains at the heart of Javanese religion. As an example of religious syncretism, it shows how – and with what inventive grace – people can come to terms with their differences.

**NOTES**

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1 Hefner’s (1985: 104-10) account of Muslim slamets, embedded in an illuminating comparison with Hindu ritual, is similar to Geertz’s. See also Jay (1969: 206-14), Koentjaraningrat (1985: 347-52); Sullivan (1992: 90-4); and Veth (1875: 1, 322-5). I give fuller consideration to recent studies in a forthcoming book on religion in Banyuwangi.

2 Only Mayer and Moll (1909: 5-6) note this distinction. They also observed that Javanese religious ‘syncretisme’ was especially evident in these feasts. Word limits preclude a discussion of *sedhekah* here.


4 Another parallel, Barth’s (1993) study of cultural diversity in neighbouring Bali, contrary to my emphasis, stresses ‘disorder’ and ‘underdeterminedness’ among a multiplicity of cultural traditions; and where I would point to constraint and public conformity, Barth stresses the ‘ranges of options from which a Balinese can choose in the perpetual work of constructing his or her reality’ (1993: 5). This difference of emphasis is partly due to the fact that Barth’s focus is on events and acts as the locus of cultural reproduction (1993: 96-7, 307) rather than on ritual or discourse as such.

5 The layout of the five-coloured porridge is the same as the colour scheme associated with the four quarters and the centre of the kingdom in fourteenth-century Hindu Java (Pigeaud 1964, vol. 4: 57-8; Behrend 1985).

6 Many Javanese mystics regard santri views as false if taken literally and few perform the daily prayers or attend the mosque (cf. Woodward 1989: 149-50; Zoetmulder 1995: 185-6).
When I asked one (not a sect member) whether he had ever prayed, he gave the startling reply: ‘Pray to what?’

7 A classical formulation of this view is found in Yasadipura’s Serat Cabolek, where the ‘container’ is Islamic Law and the ‘content’ Javanist mysticism (Soebardi 1975: 53; see also Woodward 1989: 72).

8 These meanings are coupled in other Indonesian languages. See Beatty 1992: 277.


10 I am describing something more precise and systematic than the diffuse significance of community symbols astutely analysed by Cohen (1985: 20-1, 55). The slamtan recruits overlapping sets of neighbours and is emphatically not about group identity or boundary markers.

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**Adam et Eve, et Vishnu: le syncrétisme du slametan Javanais**

Résumé

Cet article jette une lumière nouvelle sur le slametan, repas rituel considéré par beaucoup comme étant au cœur de la religiosité populaire javanaise. On montre que des groupes aux idéologies très diverses célèbrent ensemble ce rituel, donnant ainsi l'impression de dire les mêmes choses. Mais, en fait, ils expriment des vues opposées sur Dieu, la révélation, l'Islam, et la place de l'homme dans l'univers. Cette étude, qui éclaire la façon dont la multivocalité rituelle peut être mise à profit dans des situations marquées par une forte diversité culturelle, permet donc de repenser un sujet très classique, le syncrétisme religieux.

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