

CULTURAL ACCULTURATION OF JAVANESE ISLAM:  
A Critical Study of the *Slametan* Ritual

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ملخص

تعتبر حفلة "سلامتان" (*slametan*) موضوع جدال منذ زمان بعيد في أوساط المسلمين. فالمسألة هي: هل توافق هذه الحفلة مع تعاليم الإسلام أم لا؟ وعلى الرغم من أن الجدل حول هذه المسألة توقف مؤقتاً إلا أنها تشكل مسألة تيولوجية بصفة شاملة. لقد لفتت حفلة "سلامتان" - كما ذكر في هذه المقالة - أنظار الباحثين الأجانب وأثارت خلافاً بعيداً يرجع - على الأقل - إلى ثلاثة عوامل مترابطة: الأول، اختلاف الأساس النظري الذي استخدمه الباحثون في مجتهدهم. والثاني، النظر من جهة واحدة نتيجة اختلاف هذا الأساس النظري. والثالث، السياق التاريخي أي زمان ومكان القيام بالبحث. وتهدف هذه المقالة أن تكون "جسراً أكاديمياً" بين الآراء المتعارضة.

قدم الكاتب في هذه المقالة التحليل الذي يضم المنظرين الأنثروبولوجي والتيلوجي للبحث عن المسألة الأساسية. ويقصد بهما وجود توازن في القيام بالتحليل. ولا يهم هذه المقالة توافق هذه الحفلة مع تعاليم الإسلام وعدمه وإنما يهمها هدفان: الأول، القيام بالتحليل السريع لنظريتين كبيرتين من غيرت (Geertz) و وودوارد (Wood ward) والثاني، القيام بتفريق عناصر "سلامتان" بين ما هي من الإسلام وبين ما هي من أثر الثقافة الجاوية المحلية.

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## Abstrak

Upacara *slametan* merupakan topik perdebatan klasik di kalangan kaum muslimin. Masalah pokoknya terletak pada pertanyaan apakah praktek *slametan* itu islami atau tidak. Meskipun perdebatan mengenai *slametan* ini sempat terhenti, tetapi ia masih mendatangkan problem teologi yang bersifat inklusif. Di kalangan para sarjana asing, sebagaimana dibahas dalam tulisan ini, *slametan* mampu menarik perhatian dan mengundang penelitian yang menimbulkan kontroversi lebih jauh. Setidak-tidaknya, kontroversi itu sendiri berasal dari tiga faktor pokok yang terkait. Pertama, faktor perbedaan dasar teoritik yang dipakai oleh para ilmuwan dalam pengamatan mereka. Sebaliknya perbedaan dasar teoritik itu sendiri membawa pada faktor yang wajar, yaitu perspektif satu sisi; dan faktor terakhir adalah konteks historis dimana dan kapan penelitian dilakukan.

Tulisan ini dimaksudkan untuk menjadi "jembatan akademik" antara posisi-posisi tersebut. Dalam membicarakan pokok permasalahan, analisis campuran, perspektif antropologi dan teologi akan ditawarkan. Paduan antara kedua analisis itu dimaksudkan agar ada keseimbangan dalam melakukan analisis. Persoalan apakah secara teologis *slametan* itu sendiri segaris dengan ajaran Islam, bukanlah merupakan perhatian tulisan ini. Tetapi tulisan ini memiliki dua tujuan: pertama melakukan analisis singkat dua teori mayor tentang *slametan* dari Geertz dan Woodward. Kedua, memaparkan unsur-unsur *slametan* mana yang berasal dari Islam dan mana yang lebih dipengaruhi oleh budaya Jawa lokal.

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## I. Introduction

There is thus a peculiar cultural vision to the lowland *slametan*. It expresses an interpretative tension between what people may call "customary" and what they can call "religious." The vision no doubt varies according to region and social group throughout Java. But its most common expression testifies to a profound and ongoing process of Islamization.<sup>1</sup>

Even though most anthropologists of Java agree that the *slametan* ritual lies at the heart of "Javanese Islam," it has remained disputed along with the history of Islam in Indonesia, especially in Java, among both Indonesian Muslims<sup>2</sup> and western scholars.<sup>3</sup> The dispute itself centers around whether the *slametan* is Islamic or syncretic in origin. Or, more precisely, where the root of

the *slametan* lies within the history of Javanese Islam; does it stem from the *santri* (the most devout Muslim) or the *abangan* (the syncretic, nominal Muslim)?

The fact that there is no final or conclusive theory on the *slametan* in Javanese Islam points to the need for further elaboration. The matter of whether or not the *slametan* ritual is theologically in line with Islamic teaching is not my concern here. Through this short paper, the historical position of the *slametan* among Javanese Muslims will be elucidated. The discussion will entail a basic description of the *slametan*, including its meaning, its elements, its purposes, and its theological interpretation. It will also consist of one sub-chapter on the *slametan* forms. Before ending the study by few words on the description of Islamic components and syncretic ritual within the *slametan*, it also will deal with the *slametan* as an institutionalized ritual. I hope this study will contribute something new to the work of those western scholars who have conducted anthropological research on Javanese Islam.

## II. The Description of the *Slametan*: Meaning and Purpose

The *slametan* is a Javanese Islamic ritual conducted to gain certain blessings from God.<sup>4</sup> In more technical terms, Geertz describes the *slametan* as "the Javanese version of what is perhaps the world's most common religious ritual, the communal feast, and, as almost everywhere, it symbolizes the mystic and social unity of those participating in it."<sup>5</sup> He views the *slametan* as a the most essential ritual in Javanese religion and as a stereotypical animistic rite intended to strengthen social solidarity among the Javanese themselves. Taking a different approach from Geertz, Woodward, in more textual or "scriptural" words, describes the *slametan* as "a ritual meal at which Arabic prayers are recited and food is offered to the Prophet Muhammad, saints, and ancestors, who are implored to shower blessings on the community."<sup>6</sup> From this definition, it is obvious that Woodward assumes that the *slametan* is a part of the Islamic rites, stemming from the deeply rooted *Sufi* interpretation of the tradition of Islam.

In spite of the above disputes, the *slametan* plays a central role in the structure of Javanese Islamic rites. In a general sense, it is intended to create, citing Beatty's formulation, "a state of well-being, security and freedom from hindrances of both a practical and spiritual kind".<sup>7</sup> This being secure and freed from any spiritual hindrance is closely associated, even paralleled, with the Javanese word, *slamet*. Most scholars have defined the concept of *slamet* in psychological terms. Koentjaraningrat, a Javanese scholar, refers to it as "a state in which events will run their fixed course and nothing untoward will

happen to anyone."<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, Geertz defines it in a more negative way as "that peculiarly negative state of bodily and mental equanimity."<sup>9</sup>

Woodward situates the concept of *slamet* within social discourse as both "mental states and social conditions."<sup>10</sup> Psychological peacefulness in both the individual and the social context is, he argues, the central key to the concept of *slamet*. The individual is to be said *slamet* when "his mind is at rest, untroubled by worldly concerns or supernatural fears....The community (however defined) is *slamet* when there is an adequate level of material prosperity together with an absence of social or political conflict".<sup>11</sup> The interpretation of *slamet* in its Javanese conception results, in turn, in a more technical and processional rite with the reciting of some Islamic prayers -- largely are taken from verses of the Qur'ān-- and some other components, such as providing traditional Javanese food and so on.

Viewed from the etymological sense, the word *slamet* is tightly rooted in an Arabic word, *salām* (masculine) or *salāmat* (feminine). In the context of religious tradition, *salām* is also used as a salutation for both humans and non-humans, like spiritual beings and angels. The phrase *al-salām 'alaykum* (peace be upon you) is an obvious use of the word *salām* in Islam in either a ritual or a social context. The person(s) to whom the *salām* is addressed is strongly recommended to answer by saying "*wa 'alaykum al-salām*" (peace be upon you too). Sometimes the more complete response is more commendable by saying "*wa 'alaykum al-salām wa rahmat Allāh wa barakātuh*" (On you be the peace, blessing and mercy of Allāh).<sup>12</sup>

The *slametan* ritual is also called *kenduri* or *kenduren* (J.) due to its close association with ritual meal traditions throughout the Muslim world (Indo-Persian, Acehnese, and Urdu *kanduri*, Malay *kenduri*). But the latter is distinct from the former in being held in the evening, usually after the sun has gone down and the evening prayer (*maghrib* prayer) has been completed. In its etymological sense, the term *kenduri* is complicated. Derived from Persian, its literal meaning is tablecloth. It is "used in *Shāfi'ite* legal texts to refer to feasts held in honor of the Prophet Muhammad, saints, and souls of the dead".<sup>13</sup> On the basis of the etymological association between the *slametan* and *kenduri* it is obvious that the tradition of the *slametan* among Javanese Muslims has, therefore, a historical link to the tradition of Islamic ritual in some other Muslim countries like India and Malaysia.

### C. The *Slametan* Forms

A *slametan* ceremony is usually held by a particular family which needs special prayers from its next-door neighbors and acquaintances nearby in order to gain either safety, blessings from God or protection from certain calamities.<sup>14</sup> The male members of the household attend this ritual ceremony; some relatives who live in the same village or town, and a number of invited guests who are predominantly males also attend.<sup>15</sup> All of them are usually invited orally by a chosen messenger shortly before the sunset prayer.

The process of *slametan* is usually accompanied by traditional Javanese meals --that is why some scholars, including Geertz, have characterized them as Islamic ritual meals, rather than emphasizing the spiritual meaning behind them.<sup>16</sup> Ritual meals are traditionally acknowledged as central to every *slametan* event in Java, as are the Arabic prayers (*du'ā'*, A.).<sup>17</sup> The most common food provided during the *slametan* is yellow rice (*sega kuning*, J.) and *apam* or *apem* (J., popular snacks in South India and Malay offered to the dead in many Asian Muslim countries). In many regions and elsewhere in Central Java, *apem* is closely associated with the death, and thus it is considered taboo to eat.<sup>18</sup>

The ceremony is usually held in the front room of the house. In an average peasant house, mats are laid on the floor, and two or three bamboo trays (*tampah*, J.), on which food is provided, are placed on the mats in the center of the room. The food consists of rice cones --sometimes yellow rice--decorated with side dishes of fish, eggs, meat, vegetables, and fruits, showing up the variety of colors and particular shapes of the side dishes (*tumpeng*, J.) which are usually covered by the banana leaves.<sup>19</sup> There are also one or two kettles containing tea and a number of glasses for the guests, along with bowls containing fresh water used for hand washing before eating the dishes. Some plates are also available on which the guests put the food.

Once the leaf-covered dishes (*tumpeng*, J.) are placed in the center of the room, the invited guests are all seated cross-legged around the mat(s) known as *sila* (J.). Before the *slametan* ritual begins, they start with some plain talk among themselves on certain trivial topics. Enjoying cigarettes provided by the landlord, some of the guests are waiting for others not arrived yet. The room is slowly filled with the odor of burning Javanese incense (*menyan* or *dupa*, J.).<sup>20</sup> When they are complete, the ceremony is started with a brief address by the host, delivered usually in a highly formal Javanese style (*kromo inggil*, J.).

The opening speech by the host is called *ujub* (J., statement of intent). The purpose the *ujub* is, firstly, to welcome the invited guests and to express gratitude for their attendance. Secondly, it is to explain the specific reason for the *slametan*, e.g. the circumcision of his son, the naming of his child, the marriage of his daughter, the seven-month period of his daughter or wife's

pregnancy, the death of a member of his family, etc. The third purpose is to mention the general reason for the rite, such as safety or avoiding bad luck and so on. The last is to apologize for the lack of eloquence in his speech and the inadequacy of the food.<sup>21</sup>

In more orthodox Muslim families --especially those influenced by reformist Islam's call for a return to the Qur'ān and the abolition of syncretic rites not explicitly authorized in Islam, the *ujub* speech in their *kenduren* or *slametan* concludes with a simple expression of thanks for attendance and a repeated appeal for forgiveness for any unintentional inadequacies. The *ujub* is not regarded as the ritual part of their *kenduren*, but merely as a secular protocol or secular welcoming speech. The ritual part of the *kenduren* is Arabic prayer or *du'ā'* --sometimes called *donga* or *ndonga* (J.)--<sup>22</sup> led by a special religious person such as *modin* (an official religious specialist) or *kiyayi* (an Islamic teacher) after the host has finished his *ujub* speech.

The *donga* is largely drawn from the verses of the Qur'ān. The most common passage chanted in the *slametan* is the opening passage of the Qur'ān, the *fātiḥah*. The *fātiḥah* is the most common prayer in the Muslim world and the first chapter of the Qur'ān. On other occasions, some other passages of the Qur'ān are often chanted which are suited to the purpose of the ceremony. The *fātiḥah* is followed by one or more further selections from the Qur'ān. *Surah Yā Sīn* (chapter 35) is always recited at the death *slametan*, while *al-Ikhlās* (chapter 112) or *Qaf* (chapter 50) are often recited at exorcisms, when the *slametan* is intended to restore peacefulness.<sup>23</sup>

To terminate the *slametan*, the *modin* recites the last part of the *donga* and the guests and host hold their palms facing upward, greeting each pause with a loud "*amin*" (amen). This kind of posture is used as a gesture not only in the *slametan* ceremony but also in most *donga* prayers in Muslim ritual activities, like the five daily prayers (*ṣalāt*) and at the tombs of saints. When the *modin* finishes his *donga*, the other attendance rub their face by their palms symbolizing that they absorb the blessings descending from the heaven (God).<sup>24</sup>

When the *donga* is finished, the *modin* is invited by the host to begin the meal, and is followed in this by the other guests. With the plates or banana leaves provided by the host, each guest serves himself and returns to his seat to eat. The food is usually picked up with the fingertips of the right hand (*muluk*, J.), even though forks and spoons are provided. Usually the guests only eat part of the food they have taken and they will wrap the rest of it in the leaf and taking it home after having thanked the host. The host sometimes distributes food packages, using containers made of plaited bamboo (*ḥeṣek*, J.), to be taken home by the guests. The food that the guests have taken from the

bamboo trays is eaten at the *slametan*, while the food taken home is called *brekat* (J.).<sup>25</sup>

In some regions of Central Java, the *slametan* is identified with the ritual activities called *tahlilan*<sup>26</sup> through recitation of the phrase *lā ilāha illa-llāh* repeatedly in chorus by those in attendance. The *tahlilan* itself may last for more than one hour at a stretch even though in some parts of the region -- especially in the homes of *priyayi* (aristocrat) families-- the duration is usually limited to a quarter or half an hour, except for the mortuary *slametan*.<sup>27</sup> The guests will be invited to eat after the *tahlilan* is finished and will be followed by other activities which are the same as those described earlier.

#### D. The *Slametan* as an Institutionalized Javanese Ritual

The *slametan* has been, and still is, a strong institutional ritual within the wider structure of Javanese rituals. As a preserved ritual, the *slametan* can function as a "theological bridge" among Javanese society between the *abangan* Muslims and *santri* Muslims. The *abangan* --even combined with *priyayi*-- and *santri* Muslims are able to share a theological paradigm based on, citing Geertz's words, "contextual relativism" and "relativistic tolerance".<sup>28</sup> In this respect, the *slametan* has a pivotal role in preserving the theological paradigm. For example, when the *abangan* --and *priyayi*-- family holds a *slametan* ceremony, they always trust the *santri* to lead the ceremony.<sup>29</sup> The *santri*, on the other occasions, will invite all of their next door neighbors, including the *abangan*. In other words, we can say that the *slametan* is one of the most important social rituals in Java.

In the context of the position of the *slametan* as an institutionalized ritual, it is important to note that Javanese Muslims tend to refer to the *slametan* when they face certain hindrances in their daily life. In this position, the *slametan* ceremony becomes an informally institutionalized solution to certain ills.<sup>30</sup> This position is also obvious when we observe some periodical or, quoting Geertz, "calendrical" events such as the commemoration of birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (*garebeg Mulud*),<sup>31</sup> which is officially held by the palace family (*keluarga keraton*) in Surakarta and Yogyakarta.

The *Garebeg Mulud* held by the Yogyakarta *keraton* (J., palace) is one of the biggest *slametan* ceremonies in Central Java, especially in Yogyakarta. This ritual ceremony is accompanied by a pair of royal *gamelan*, the traditional Javanese orchestra, named *Kiai Sekati* performed at the central mosque of the court from the 6<sup>th</sup> of *Mulud* (the lunar month in which the Prophet was born) for 6 continuous days and nights. The Javanese people usually call the *garebeg* ceremony *Sekaten*, a Javanese word derived from Arabic, *shahadatayn* (two testimonial phrases). From the 1920s the annual fair of the Yogyakarta

principality was held during the same period at Alun-alun Lor (J., the main public square to the north of the royal palace).<sup>32</sup> This massive ritual festival later on became the largest, and today attracts the attention of both domestic and foreign tourists.

In addition to the *garebeg slametan* held officially by the royal palaces of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, *bersih desa* ("village cleansing")<sup>33</sup> is another form of a culturally institutional *slametan* in most villages in Central Java. The *bersih desa* is aimed at either appeasing the village's tutelary or guardian spirit (*dhanyang*, J.) or celebrating the post-harvest events as a result of the prosperity given by God.<sup>34</sup> So, the *bersih desa* serves significantly twofold purposes: maintaining agricultural reproduction and preserving hospitable relations with the world of local spirits.

In addition to contributing money for the cost of sponsoring a *wayang* (J., shadow puppet) performance, each village household also contributes a pair of *ambengan* or *tumpeng* (J., trays of prepared food) containing cooked rice surrounded by discrete portions of accompaniments and some other *jajan pasar* (J., market snacks). After a certain number of trays have been collected at the *lurah's* (village headman) house, around at 11 a.m. a number of men acting as household representatives assemble for the *slametan* proper, which focuses on the distribution of prepared food after a formal speech (*ujub*, J.) --delivered by the *lurah*-- and prayers --led by an official religious representative-- devoted both to general well-being and the effectual execution of the event at hand.<sup>35</sup>

#### E. The *Slametan*: Between Islamic Core and Syncretic Periphery

It is a matter of fact that many scholars say that the *slametan* holds the most central position of the Javanese religion, not exclusively Islam.<sup>36</sup> At least, we can safely say that the *slametan* is a communal ritual shared by both the *kejawen* (*abangan*) and the *santri*. The performance of *slametan* ceremony is recognized as having wider social benefits; it promotes a state of *rukun* (J., "traditional coexistence") among participants.<sup>37</sup> The problem arises when we ask the question: To whom does the *slametan* belong? This is a classic question that is never fully answered by scholars.

Except for Woodward, scholars tend to contend that the *slametan* is theologically syncretic, because it is deeply rooted in Javanese religious philosophy. Although it obviously incorporates Islamic elements, most people regard the *slametan* as authentically Javanese and largely inspired by pre-Islamic or even Hindu religion. Beatty, for example, says that "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."<sup>38</sup>

Viewed from the context when and where such scholars as Geertz, Hefner and Beatty conducted their research, to conclude that the Javanese *slametan* is syncretic and foreign to Islam is probably reasonable. The *kejawen* world-view, at the time Geertz did his research in a fictitious city called "Modjokuto," was relatively dominant. The pattern of the *slametan* in the 1950s to the 1960s was still *abangan* oriented, due partly to the *abangan* dominance over religious and cultural life in Java. Geertz found the *slametan* elements to be syncretic and animistic, thus he places his *slametan* discussion under the chapter of *abangan* variant.<sup>39</sup>

The ideological dominance of the *abangan*, however, has gradually declined. To say that the *slametan* is purely syncretic or animistic in the today's context, is no longer empirically valid. This argument was only solid in the historical context in which the research was conducted. It is this reason that makes Woodward, by conducting a similar research project in Yogyakarta about thirty years later, counters the theory of the *slametan* as developed by Geertz. This theoretical antithesis means that Geertz's theory is not adaptable to the *slametan* phenomena happened during Woodward conducted his research.

Woodward, in this regard, standing on the diametric side of Geertz' position, contends that "*slametan* are performed on the occasion of, and often replace, rites required by the *shari'ah*."<sup>40</sup> He, furthermore, believes that

"In many respects the meanings of the *slametan* parallel those of liturgical prayer. Differences are based on a distinction between *shari'ah*-centric and mystical notions of community. While they share the Islamic concern with community, *santri* and *kejawen* Muslims define it in different ways, which influences their interpretations of the *slametan* and the *shari'ah*. For *santri*, the public rituals required by the *shari'ah* define a community --be it a village or an urban mosque, a *pesantren*, or, in an extended sense, all those who participate in the *hajj*, in the feast of sacrifice, and so on. Participation in the public 'id services is of great importance because it constitutes a supralocal Muslim community."<sup>41</sup>

Woodward, viewed through the quotation above, can be seen as an obvious proponent of the Islamic *slametan*. He, on the basis of both scriptural foundation --the Qur'ān and Hadīth-- and historical fact, opposes the earlier theory of the *slametan* established by anthropologists and ethnographers such as Geertz and Hefner.

Even though his textual knowledge of the *slametan* is academically remarkable, he, however, errs in identifying the historical acculturation of Islam into the Javanese segments. In supporting his arguments, Woodward

simply shows that the *slametan* ritual historically stems from ritual meals practiced elsewhere throughout the Muslim world such as South India, Persia, Bangladesh, etc. He, on the other hand, ignores the potentialities of cultural association between Islam and Javanese culture. The *slametan* ritual form practiced by the Javanese Muslims nowadays is, in my opinion, a reflection of the theological integration of Islamic world-view into the local culture of Java. The *slametan* is, therefore, a product of cultural accommodation between Islamic values and Javanese culture.

Another glaring laxity of the theoretical arguments developed by Woodward is that, in justifying the *slametan* ritual, he equates the *slametan* as practiced by Javanese Muslims with the *kenduri* practiced in some Muslim countries. In this respect, he, again, does not fully comprehend the characteristic of the *slametan* in the context of Javanese cultural identity, which itself is theologically "complicated" and consists of a variety of elements. The Javanese *slametan* is, of course, somewhat different when compared to that of other parts of the Muslim world. If Woodward considers the Javanese *slametan* ceremony an actualization of the "ideal" Islamic *ṣūfī* doctrines, he thus fails to see the historical fact that the Javanese Islam is an intra-cultural marriage between local culture and Islam itself.<sup>42</sup> In addition, using the perspective of the *kenduri* tradition practiced in South India to understanding the Javanese *slametan* is argumentatively weak.

One point developed by Woodward, in supporting his justification of the *slametan* as being Islamic, is that the significance of the *slametan* is found in the result of ritual blessed-food distribution, which is in line with the giving of alms in Islam (*ṣadaqah*, A.) to the people who need it. He says that "feeding the poor is charity (*ṣadaqah*, A.) and yields blessing for both donor and recipient."<sup>43</sup> To understand the Javanese *slametan* simply from this perspective is naive, since the bereaved family holding the *slametan*, for example, is itself the first to receive any charity before anybody else.

The fact that Islam was propagated by the nine saints in Java by means of *ṣūfī* teaching is historically true. But the characteristic of the Javanese *ṣūfī*, later on, differed itself from the *ṣūfī* tradition practiced in most Muslim countries. This argument, at least, has been justified by Ricklefs as follows:

Javanese mysticism has an antiquity and a fundamental place among the masses of Javanese society outweighing that of Islam..... Islam's initial growth in Java was probably due in large part to its own mystical nature. Islamic mysticism still exists in Java. But as *santri* revivalists and modernists have sought to purify Javanese Islam of its mystical practices and doctrines, they have driven some mystics away from their nominal adherence to Islam.<sup>44</sup>

Woodward should not, however, has placed the theological position of the Javanese *slametan* of the same level of the South Indian *kenduri*. A number of Javanese ingredients are unique, such as five-color porridge, Javanese incense burning, typical Javanese orchestra (*gamelan*) accompaniment, and still many other cultural values which are very much influenced by *kejawen* cultural tradition. We, however, should not neglect the contribution of the local Javanese elements shaping the form of the Javanese *slametan* of today. Two major elements, hence, have shaped the Javanese *slametan*: local Javanese values and Islamic elements.

The reason why the Javanese *slametan* is more Islamic today than it used to be can possibly be understood from the perspective of the so called "Islamization" of the Javanese culture by the *santri*. The Islamization of the *slametan* began when the *abangan*, whenever they performed certain ritual ceremonies like the *slametan*, relied too much on the *santri*. This great dependence is, without doubt, admitted by Hefner by saying that: "In most *kenduren*, the men invited to lead the guests in Islamic prayer is a local elder or Islamic leader, adept in the recitation of Arabic-language prayers."<sup>45</sup> In a more optimistic way, Hefner even claims that the Javanese *slametan* has been in an "ongoing process of Islamization."<sup>46</sup>

On the basis of the explanation above, all we can say is that the Javanese *slametan* is a unique ritual that has a certain local typicality; that is, its close association with the Javanese tradition and culture. It is said to be unique because no other rituals outside the Java island can be exactly equalized with the Javanese *slametan*. Scholars who argue that the *slametan* is purely animistic are, thus, absolutely incorrect if we understand the issue in the context of Javanese life today. Other scholars who say that the Javanese *slametan* is, on the other hand, Islamic, are not completely right, because the *slametan* has undergone a long journey of Islamization process by the *santri*. What we can safely conclude is that the *slametan* consists mainly of two major elements; the core and the periphery. The core of the *slametan* lies at the Islamic prayers established for the first time by some Islamic Javanese saints and the *santris* who have replaced the *kejawen* prayers (*mantera*, J.) with the former ones. Meanwhile the periphery of the *slametan* is the local Javanese symbols preserved by the *santri* for the reason not to Islamicize the Javanese "accessories" in an abrupt way, thus preserving certain local elements.

## F. Conclusion

In the light of the above explanation it is obvious that Geertz views the Javanese *slametan* from its historical setting, not its theological significance.

Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that he errs at observing it --as Woodward has pointed out through his research; he was successfully able to "bring home" the reality of the phenomenological fact of the *slametan*. Geertz' theory of the *slametan* reflects what it was in the context where and when he conducted his research. By revealing such historical phenomenon of the *slametan*, Geertz is the one most deserving to be a "spokesman" on the subject of the *slametan* in an anthropological context.

Throughout a period of thirty years, Geertz' theory of the *slametan* remained superior. Not until the late 1980s, when Mark Woodward did the same research on the *slametan*, did Geertz' theory break down. On the basis of a historical sketch of the *slametan*, and by digging at its theological foundations in the most central Islamic sources, the Qur'ān and Hadith,<sup>47</sup> Woodward saw that the substance of the *slametan* is more Islamic than that of what Geertz admitted. The historical link between the Javanese Islam and South Indian Muslims is one of the most dominant factors in Islamicizing the *slametan*, he argues.

To reconcile two contradictory theories above, it is very important to note that from the point of view of the elements of which the *slametan* is constructed, the *slametan* is a Javanese ritual consisting of two major components: core and periphery. If Geertz, in my estimation, just sees the *slametan* from its periphery, Woodward, then, views it from its core.<sup>48</sup> Both of them, again, in my evaluation, do not observe the *slametan* from a complete perspective; inner dimension (theology) and outer dimension (anthropology). We have to acknowledge that the *slametan* is a product of cultural acculturation between Islam and the local Javanese traditional values; the ancient Javanese believes or the syncretism of Hinduism and animism.<sup>49</sup> The *slametan* as practiced nowadays by the Javanese Muslims is comprised on the one hand of Islamic prayers mostly taken from Islamic scriptural sources, and local Javanese accessories, on the other.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Robert W. Hefner, *Hindu Javanese: Tengger Tradition and Islam*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 109-10.

<sup>2</sup>We, in this respect, can see the debate among Indonesian Muslims in the historical accounts. The *slametan* has been, and still is, disputed between the modernists --voiced by the *Muhammadiyah* and the *Persatuan Islam* (Persis)-- and the traditionalists --represented by *Nahdlatul Ulama*. The dispute centers around whether it is a part of Islamic rituals or the product of a heretical syncretism derived from Javanese animism

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and Hinduism. The first camp, the *Muhammadiyah* and Persis, being consistent with its, tries to contend that the *slametan* is not Islamic and should, therefore, be eradicated. The *slametan* is tied to the *abangan's* philosophy of life, its belief in "non-Islamic" spirits, and some other superstitions regarding propitious and unlucky days and numbers. This is why the *slametan*, according to this camp, should be rejected. The second camp, on the other hand, views the *slametan* as a part of Islamic rituals since it has been Islamicized by the *walisanga* (the nine saints) who propagated Islam in Java. For this debate, see Howard Federspiel, *Persatuan Islam: Islamic Reform in Twentieth Century Indonesia*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1970), especially pp. 71-4.

<sup>3</sup>With regard to western scholars, there are at least three with opposing views. Our first scholar, Geertz, sees the *slametan*, basing his theoretical arguments on anthropological studies, as a Javanese ritual from animism and foreign to Islam. The theoretical arguments on which he based were deeply rooted in the context of when and where his research was conducted, that is in the 1950s. At that time, the religious domain in the Javanese tradition was predominantly under the *abangan* influence, while the *santri* were trusted by the former as the "conductor" of the *slametan*. Due to the fact that the *abangan* relied heavily on the *santri* when they undertook their ritual performance, there has been, then, a reasonable opportunity for the *santri* to Islamicize the performance of the *slametan* (See Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, [Illinois: Glencoe, 1960], especially pp. 11-15). By the middle of the 1980s, Hefner, basing his research on the Hindu Javanese Tengger, found the *slametan* to be under the influence of Hinduism. This assumption might be reasonable since the population amongst whom he conducted his research was largely Hindu. But in the late 1980s, as one of the results of his research on the mysticism of Islam in Yogyakarta, Woodward found that the *slametan* had almost been completely Islamicized by the *santri*. In tracing the theological foundations of the *slametan*, he was able to reveal some Islamic values in it such as the chanting of the verses of the Qur'ān by the *modin* or *penghulu* --the religious person who leads the *slametan* ritual. He states that "the religious goals of the *slametan* are rooted in local interpretation of the *Sufi* theory of mystical union, and that the modes of ritual action it employs are based on practices attributed to the prophet Muhammad by Ḥadīth." (Mark R. Woodward, *The Slametan: "Textual Knowledge and Ritual Performance in Central Javanese Islam," History of Religion*, 28, 54-89; see also, his book, *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta*, [Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989], 52).

<sup>4</sup>Despite its variety, this definition is the most common one among scholars, both Indonesian, like Kuntjaringrat, and western. Each scholar has his own definition of the *slametan* based his own perspective. One might emphasize, let us say, the anthropological perspective over the theological, while others vice versa. The definition also changes, keeping up with the changes of *slametan* patterns within certain periods of time, depending on what camp "dominates" the *slametan*. This definition is, however, taken from the substance of the *slametan* itself as a system of Javanese ritual

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as a whole regardless of the technical descriptions and the diversity of its characteristics in each region within Java.

<sup>5</sup>Geertz, "The Religion," 11.

<sup>6</sup>Woodward, "The *Slametan*," 54.

<sup>7</sup>Andrew Beatty, "Adam and Eve and Vishnu: Syncretism in the Javanese *Slametan*," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 2, No. 2, June 1996, 274. Beatty, however, tends to follow Hefner's theoretical arguments since his research was conducted in a region in the tip of eastern East Java, Banyuwangi, in which the majority of Muslims are much influenced by Hindu tradition. As we know, Banyuwangi is geographically close to Bali, where Hinduism is the major religious presence.

<sup>8</sup>Koentjaraningrat,

<sup>9</sup>Geertz, "The Religion," 13.

<sup>10</sup>Woodward, "The *Slametan*," 67.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* In discussing these theological foundations, Woodward quotes a number of Qurānic verses as follows: "When ye are greeted with a greeting, greet ye with a better one than it return it. Lo! Allah taketh count of all things" (4:86). "But when ye enter houses, salute one another with a greeting from Allah, blessed and sweet [the *salām* greeting]" (24:61). "When those who believe in Our revelations come unto thee say: Peace be unto you!" (6:54).

<sup>13</sup> Woodward, "The *Slametan*," 64. See also, Federspiel, "Persatuan", 204.

<sup>14</sup>What I mean by the *slametan*, in this context, is more the so-called "intermittent *slametans*" held by a particular family for certain purposes rather than other forms of the *slametan*. Actually, the *slametan* ritual takes various forms. Geertz has identified three forms of the *slametan* cycles: calendrical, village, and intermittent. The first form of the *slametan* is always connected with the yearly Muslim calendar. The ceremony of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (*garebeg* in its massive form, or *Muludan* in a smaller form) is one of the most popular *slametan* in Central Java. The second form is concerned with the social activities of *bersih desa* (cleansing the village of dangerous spirits). This type of the *slametan* is accomplished by providing traditional foods like *apem*, yellow rice, etc. dedicated to the so-called *danyang desa* (guardian spirits of the village). The last form of the *slametan* is intermittent, designed to bless a person or group during such occasional events as moving, traveling, falling ill, marriage, circumcision, death, or coming into good fortune (Geertz, "The Religion," 77-85).

<sup>15</sup> Koentjaraningrat, *Javanese Culture*, (Singapore, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 347.

<sup>16</sup> Geertz, "The Religion," 11.

<sup>17</sup>There are various interpretations concerning to whom the meals are dedicated. Among *abangan* belief, the food provided in the *slametan* is dedicated to deities, spirits, and other spiritual guardians. Through the dedicated meals, the *abangans* believe that the deities and spirits guarantee them safety, nothing will happen to them, and the circumvention of catastrophes due to the deities' anger. This type of interpretation is captured by some earlier anthropologists such as Geertz and Hefner in seeing the phenomenon of the *slametan* (See, Geertz, "The Religion," 14; cf. Hefner, "Hindu Javanese," 110). In most *santri's* eyes, the food, however, simply reflects as giving charity or feeding the people who are economically "the have not" (*śadaqah*). From the *santri* point of view, the distribution of food to the poor, neighbors, and relatives are among the examples of charity inspired by the Qur'ān and Ḥadith. Woodward, in this respect, uses this perspective in viewing the *slametan* phenomena in central Java, especially Yogyakarta (Woodward, "The *Slametan*," 63).

<sup>18</sup> This taboo, in turn, makes an image that *apem* is a sacred food despite the fact that it is a common snack in the South and Southeast Asia countries tradition (Woodward, *Ibid.* 73).

<sup>19</sup> The kind of food provided by the landlord, however, varies from one region to the other, depending on what type of *slametan* is being held. This is very much determined by the influence of local tradition of the given culture. If the *slametan* is designed as a prayer for the dead, the food is usually this *tumpeng* (side dishes food decorated with fish, meat, etc.) and supplemented with some other snacks like *apem* or *apam*. In East Java, especially in the Banyuwangi region, porridge in different colors is one of the most favorite meals during the *slametan*. (Beatty, "Adam and Eve," 274).

<sup>20</sup>Since the *slametan* is more "Islamicized" now, some *santri* families consider the burning of Javanese incense (*menyan* or *dupa*, J.) to be part of the Hindu tradition and, therefore, they reject it. Some Javanese Muslims, however, continue this tradition, saying that the burning of the *dupa* is free of Hindu symbolism, and is intended simply to make the room fragrant. They argue that making a room fragrant is not contradictory to the *shari'ah* (Islamic Law) and is not forbidden by Islam.

<sup>21</sup> Geertz, "The Religion," 13; cf. Woodward, "The *Slametan*," 74; cf. Hefner, "Hindu Javanese," 106. According to Woodward, the *ujub* is more than a polite speech having five "theologically motivated purposes": "(1) to link an elaborate feast with the simple ritual meals at which Muhammad officiated; (2) to define the community to whom blessing will be imparted; (3) to specify saints and other beings to whom food and

prayers are dedicated; (4) to establish his humanity". (See Woodward, "The *Slametan*," 74-75).

<sup>22</sup>*Donga* is a Javanese gloss for the Arabic term *du'ā'*. It is a prayer of supplication that may be included in the five daily prayers (*ṣalāt*). Many *kejawen* Muslims use Javanese *donga* when they are visiting tombs, but in many occasions the Arabic *donga* is preferable. Unlike *ṣalāt*, the precise form of the *donga* is not explicitly regulated by the *sharī'ah* (Islamic Law); it may be recited in Arabic or, if this is not possible, in the vernacular. For this account, see Woodward, "Islam in Java," 121-22.

<sup>23</sup> Woodward, "The *Slametan*," 79.

<sup>24</sup> Geertz, "The Religion," 13.

<sup>25</sup> Derived from the Arabic word *barakah*, *berkat* means blessings from God. This *brekat* is one of the ways in the *slametan* of attaining the blessings from the God. See, Woodward, "Islam in Java," 145.

<sup>26</sup> Originally stemmed from the Arabic word *tahlīl*, its literal meaning is chanting the Arabic phrase *lā ilāha illa Allāh* (there is no god except God). Later on, this ceremony was institutionalized as *tahlilan* ritual and is still one of the most integral parts of the *slametan* ceremony in Java. The *tahlilan* ritual also can be undertaken outside of the room, as when visiting the tombs of saints. See, Koentjaraningrat, "Javanese," 348.

<sup>27</sup> Koentjaraningrat, *Ibid.*, 349-50. The *slametan*, thus, may form a part of an individual's ritual life, such as the mortuary rites on the seventh, fortieth, one hundredth, and one thousandth day after a death (*mitung dinteni*, *nyekawan ndasani*, *nyatus*, *nyewu*, J.).

<sup>28</sup> Geertz, "The Religion," 366-67.

<sup>29</sup> See, footnote 3.

<sup>30</sup> An example is given by Mulder concerning the misadventure faced by one member of a Javanese family. In his research, Mulder witnessed how Pak Amat, a graduate of Gadjah Mada University and an important leader of his *kampung* (quarter town) given the fact as a leader of a *kebatinan* group, became a leading lottery predictor in Central Java. Despite his "career" as a lottery predictor was a matter of controversy among *kebatinan* leaders in Yogyakarta, he began to give predictions anyway. His first predictions were sure numbers, which meant that if he said that the outcome would be 15, he believed that this prediction would be true. But on one other occasion, he failed to predict the right number, so a lot of Javanese and, to some extent Chinese, lost more than they could afford to lose. His failing prediction resulted in a massive crisis especially in his *kampung* and somebody in one of the Javanese families fell ill, meanwhile there was no money left to buy medicine. Finally, they believed that the

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only solution was the *slametan* intended to re-establish order and unity in the house of the family that had been most hurt by the gambling. The *slametan* ceremony began at 9 p.m. and Pak Amat was late because he came at 11 p.m. In this ritual ceremony, Pak Amat sincerely confessed to be a sinner, he repented and condemned himself in front of the audience. By giving such an example, Mulder actually has come to the position that the *slametan* has a massive and important role in the Javanese society although he does not state it explicitly. The *slametan* functions as an institutionalized ritual ceremony when individuals or the Javanese society have serious problems. (Niels Mulder, *Mysticism & Everyday Life in Contemporary Java*, (Singapore, Southeast Asian Studies: Singapore University Press, 1983), 52-53. See also his article, "Abangan Javanese Religious Thought and Practice," *Bijdragen*, No. 139, 261).

<sup>31</sup>The literal meaning of *garebeg* is royal audience. This ritual ceremony has been institutionalized by both the Surakarta and Yogyakarta palaces to commemorate some "official holidays" based on Muslim calendar. Three major Islamic holidays are the most common ones: *Id al-Fitr*, at the end of the fasting month of *Ramadan* (*garebeg sawal*, J.), *Id al-Adha*, the feast of sacrifice held in connection to the *hajj* (*garebeg besar*, J.), and the *Mawlid al-Nabi* (A.), the birthday of the prophet Muhammad (*garebeg maulud*, J.). These three ritual ceremonies are commonly conducted at the northern segment of the palace (*keraton*, J.). On these occasions the enthroned sultan is believed to attain spiritual union with his God and with his assembled subjects, assuming the mediating role of a *Sufi* master. For a more detailed account of this, see Woodward, "Islam," 205-214. See also, Mitsuo Nakamura, *The Crescent Arises over the Banyan Tree: A Study of the Muhammadiyah Movement in a Central Javanese Town*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Ithaca: Cornell University, 1976, 42-46.

<sup>32</sup> Nakamura, *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>33</sup> *Bersih desa* is also sometimes called *merdi desa* (to take care of the village) or *sedekah bumi* (to give alms to the earth). This event commonly occur in such areas as the southern Central Java, especially Gunung Kidul, a region adjacent to Yogyakarta which is located at the sea shore of the southern sea (*Laut Kidul*, J.). See, John Pamberton, *On the Subject of "Java,"* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 242.

<sup>34</sup>In former times, of course, it was a village's tutelary spirit(s) and deities believed to has provided a sense of well-being and given the fertility to the soil so that the Javanese could harvest their farming result well. *Bersih desa* ritual ceremony is usually performed at the center of place(s) believed to be the site of the village's tutelary spirit such as an oddly endowed well, spring, or banyan tree. This ritual ceremony is usually accompanied by the performance of *wayang kulit* (J., shadow puppet) portraying the story of Dewi Sri, one of the most common deities believed to provide fertility for their farming fields. The performance of a Sri story, some villagers noted, acknowledged the

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completion of the harvest and promised prosperity in the next agricultural season. See, Pamberton, "On the Subject," 243.

<sup>35</sup> Pamberton, "On the Subject," 243-44.

<sup>36</sup> Geertz, "The Religion," 11; cf. Beatty, "Adam and Eve," 284; cf. Hefner, "Hindu Javanese," 109-10.

<sup>37</sup> Geertz, "The Religion," 61.

<sup>38</sup> Beatty, "Adam and Eve," 284.

<sup>39</sup> What surprised me in Geertz's study was when I found the *slametan* placed under the section of *abangan* variant. It is quite surprising because the *slametan* phenomenon in Javanese Islam is not in line anymore with what Geertz described in his book, *The Religion of Java*. As a part of the Javanese culture, I found the *slametan* ceremony has been so Islamicized that it does not belong to the *abangan* Muslims any longer, but mostly *santris* --both traditionalists and modernists-- in Java have acknowledged the *slametan* as a part of their ritual ceremony. In this regard, Geertz's description that the *slametan* ritual is a village ritual that loses of its force in urban environments is completely contradictory to the factual religious phenomena nowadays. As Woodward noticed "the *slametan* is not exclusively, or even primarily, a village ritual. Nor is it limited to the *kejawen* community. *Slametan* are performed in mosques, at *pesantran*, at the graves of saints, and in the homes of traditional *santri*." See, Woodward, "The *Slametan*," 66.

<sup>40</sup> Woodward, "The *Slametan*," 81.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Concerning the process of acculturation between Islam and Javanese cultural history, read William R. Roff, "Islam Obscured? Some Reflections on Studies of Islam and Society in Southeast Asia," in *Archipel* 29, no. 1 (1985): 7-34.

<sup>43</sup> Woodward, "The *Slametan*," 81.

<sup>44</sup> Ricklefs, "Six Centuries of Islamization in Java," in Nehemia Levtzion (ed.), *Conversion to Islam*, (New York & London: Holmes & Meier, 1979), 124.

<sup>45</sup> Hefner, "Hindu Javanese," 108.

<sup>46</sup> See note 1.

<sup>47</sup>See note 12.

<sup>48</sup>In this sense Geertz comprehends the *slametan* purely from an anthropological perspective. He, in this regard, merely deals the "problem of meaning" embodied by the *slametan* itself in the context of cultural analysis, not through a theological understanding of it. On the other hand, Woodward observes the *slametan* based on the theological perspective rather than anthropological. Actually, to understand a traditional cult such as the *slametan* in a more comprehensive way it is not enough to use the only one single perspective, either anthropology or theology. To get a better understanding of the *slametan* we are required to combine both methodologies; anthropology, dealing with the problem of meaning of the *slametan* in the context of cultural interpretation, and theology, mostly concerned with the inner "scriptural" basis of the *slametan*.

<sup>49</sup> See, note 44.