

## REVISITING JAVANESE ISLAM: Towards a New Paradigm in Religious Studies

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### *Abstract*

*This article tends to revisiting Javanese Islamic studies. This study began from the European travelers' period who noted some aspects of society such as the religious life. Those notes show the negative label that is addressed to the Javanese religious practices. These negative labels are often reproduced in Javanese Islam studies to this day. This article argues that the negative labels in Javanese Islamic studies tend to be misrepresentative. These kinds of results cannot be separated from certain paradigms in religious studies. There are two paradigms in the study of religion which are discussed in this article. First, the world religion paradigm. This paradigm, consciously or not, is often used in Javanese Islamic studies. The implication is Javanese religious practices are often portrayed as animist, syncretic, and so on. Second, the indigenous religion paradigm. This article elaborates this paradigm because of its potential in understanding Javanese Islamic religious practice more properly. The basis of this paradigm is intersubjective relation with ethical commitment, responsibility, and reciprocity.*

**Keywords:** *Javanese Islam, The World Religion Paradigm, The Indigenous Religion Paradigm*

## INTRODUCTION

The topic in this final paper is triggered by discussion at the end of the class meeting about the validity of *the Kejawen* group. This has actually been an academic and then influenced political policy for

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centuries when West travelers and Dutch missionaries came to Java until now.<sup>1</sup> Among the main topics discussed in this debate is whether Javanese people who continue to carry out ritual traditions with all their cosmological beliefs can be accommodated and legitimately referred to Islam. Thus, the discussion then looked like there were two separate and fixed entities, namely the first Islam and the second Javanese/ism. The relationship between the two is formulated and represented by academics in different terms, such as *Abangan*,<sup>2</sup> *Javanism*<sup>3</sup> *Agami Jawi*<sup>4</sup> and so forth.

In general, all of these labels actually empirically refer to the communities which practiced the Javanese culture with all of their cosmology on one side, and sometimes they also claim themselves as Islam on the other side. For some, to some extent, their Islam is only a formality. This is usually called nominal Islam or *Islam KTP*. Sometimes, because of the same paradigm construction, they are also referred to as syncretic and not Islamic. This means, under certain conditions, they are called Islam (with a weak degree) or even considered to be non-religious. What I meant by this non-religious group is now included in the category of '*Kepercayaan*'. For a long time, this group was not recognized by the state because academically and politically they were not considered as part of the religions in Indonesia.

This has given rise to a long history of discrimination against this group politically<sup>5</sup> pejorative representation academically, and negative stigma socially<sup>6</sup> Such a conclusion has long social and political

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<sup>1</sup> Boogert, J. v. *Rethinking Javanese Islam: Towards new descriptions of Javanese traditions*. (Leiden. 2015), 43.

<sup>2</sup> Geertz, C. *The Religion of Java*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> Zoetmulder, P. *The cultural background of Indonesian politics*. (Columbia: Institute of International Studies University of South Carolina, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> Koentjaraningrat. *Javanese culture*. (Singapore: Oxford University Press. 1989)

<sup>5</sup> Maarif, S. *Pasang Surut Rekognisi Agama Leluhur dalam Politik Agama di Indonesia*. Yogyakarta: CRCS. (2018) 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Maarif, S. (eds.) *Merangkul Penghayat Kepercayaan melalui Advokasi Inklusi Sosial*. Yogyakarta: Program Studi Agama dan Lintas Budaya. 2019), 3.

implications. That is why this topic needs to be discussed academically in order to develop a new perspective in seeing phenomena more inclusive and not marginalizing certain groups.

### **Thesis Statement**

The subject in Javanese Islam discussion as represented by some of the academics above seemed nuanced pejorative for various reasons. First, perspectives that tend to be Islamic minded will narrate even though they appear to be Muslim, but in fact, they are Javanese. Second, perspectives that tend to be Javanese minded will narrate even though they appear to be Javanese, but in fact, they are Muslim (religious). Third, this whole discourse is a long link from the traveler period to the present. Therefore, being aware of this situation will prevent us from misrepresentation and make the narration more inclusive.

### **METHOD AND DATA**

This paper will focus on efforts to re-read and provide a re-representation of Kejawen, especially in relation to Islam. This method will look at Javanese Islam at the level of discourse because of several reasons (Asad, 1993). First, this is because seeing Islam and the Javanese world view in an academic narration cannot be separated from the academic construction that makes religion in anthropological studies contain various biases. This awareness then will help us to construct our perspective on the subject being discussed here: Kejawen. More simply, we cannot accept this construction as taken for granted. Even, in an extreme view, Javanese Islam can be interpreted as solely a Western experience when looking at the way Javanese people express Islam. For example, Boogert stressed by saying, "*the concept syncretist Javanese Islam and Javanism actually refer to an entity in the experience of the West, but not an entity in Javanese reality*".<sup>7</sup>

Second, this theme is not new. Many scholars focus on this issue. Among themselves, there are also serious mutual criticisms that continue to grow due to various factors. What happened to the *Kejawen*

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<sup>7</sup> Boogert, J. v. *Rethinking Javanese Islam... 4*

group in the pre-independence, post-independence era, and New Order era could be different from the current situation. All of these challenges become different due to factors such as politics.<sup>8</sup> Decision of the Constitutional Court No. 97/PUU-XIV/2016 (next will be written '2017 Constitutional Court Decision) that allowing the *Kepercayaan* group to include their religious identity on the identity card is also one of the distinguishing factors in the long history of this group.<sup>9</sup> This long-range of history also does not make this paper focus on historical studies, but will focus on seeing the construction of paradigms that have worked so far in shaping our imagination, the way we treat, until political decisions related to the relationship between religions (in this context will focus on Islam) and *Kejawen*.

For these concerns, obviously, I will use secondary data from the works of academics about Javanese Islam. In addition, various reports, political decisions, and other written sources that discussed this issue will also come to my attention. Primary sources such as direct interviews with *Kejawen* followers are not possible because of the spreading of COVID-19.

### **KEJAWEN IN POLITICAL NOTION**

This part will trace *kejawen* which refers to religious identity in the identity card. At least, we can see there are people who after the 2017 Constitutional Court decision then choose their identity as 1) *Kepercayaan* or 2) *Agama*. The problem that may arise in this categorization is that political identity sometimes becomes blurred in empirical reality. For example, there are also followers of *kepercayaan* but mention *agama* on their identity cards.<sup>10</sup>

Another problem that makes this identification difficult to use is that *kepercayaan* is only possible to be recognized by the state if they are included in the only institution called *Majelis Labur*

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<sup>8</sup> Marshall, P. (2018). The Ambiguities of Religious Freedom in Indonesia. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 89.

<sup>9</sup> Bagir, Z. A. "Kepercayaan" dan "Agama" dalam Negara Pasca-Reformasi. (Prisma, 2020), 42.

<sup>10</sup> Bagir, Z. A. "Kepercayaan" dan "Agama....",52

*Kepercayaan Indonesia* (MLKI).<sup>11</sup> In fact, their numbers are very diverse and also have diverse views as well. There are approximately Maarif, S. *Pasang Surut Rekognisi Agama Leluhur dalam Politik Agama di Indonesia*. Yogyakarta: CRCS.

400 *kepercayaan* organizations in Indonesia (Marshall, 2018: 87), other sources say there are around 300 organizations (Subagya, 1989: 9), while those registered in the Directorate of Believe (Direktorat *Kepercayaan*) and under the shelter of the MLKI are total 188.<sup>12</sup>

Politically, with all of these complexities, I want to say that *Kejawen* can be included in the categories of *agama* and *kepercayaan*. As a religion, in this context is Islam, they are often identified as non-standard Islam.<sup>13</sup> This period going on since 1965s when followers of *kepercayaan* were accused of being irreligious, affiliated with Indonesian Communist Party (PKI)<sup>14</sup> therefore could be killed as an implication of the political conflict at that time.<sup>15</sup> In such a situation, I think the reason why many followers of *kepercayaan* converted into Islam, some into Christianity, (on an identity card) makes sense. The main reason is not always because of the seeking for the truth, but because of the effort to seek salvation. The other reason for this religionization is the massive Islamic educational school, *madrasah*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mahestu, G. Emic Analysis Towards Penghayat *Kepercayaan* Dynamics in the Democratic Era. *The 3rd International Conference on Energy, Environmental, and Information System (ICENIS 2018)* (Semarang: E3S Web of Conferences. 2018), 2

<sup>12</sup> Maarif, S. (eds.) *Merangkul Penghayat Kepercayaan melalui Advokasi Inklusi Sosial*. Yogyakarta: Program Studi Agama dan Lintas Budaya, 2019). 27

<sup>13</sup> Hefner, R. W. Where have all the Abangan gone? Regionalization and the decline of non-standard Islam in contemporary Indonesia. In a. R. M. Picard, *The Politics of Religion in Indonesia: syncretism, orthodoxy, and religious contention in Java and Bali*, (Abingdon: Routledge. 2011). 71-91

<sup>14</sup> Ricklefs, M. C. *Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java: A Political, Social, Cultural and Religious History*. (Singapore: NUS Press. 2012). 81-84

<sup>15</sup> Sukamto, A. "Ketegangan Antar Kelompok Agama Pada Masa Orde Lama Sampai Awal Orde Baru: Dari Konflik Perumusan Ideologi Negara Sampai Konflik Fisik." *Jurnal Teologi Indonesia*, 2013. 33.

<sup>16</sup> Hefner, R. W. Where have all the Abangan gone?,..... 81

On the other hand, as a *kepercayaan*, in certain cases, they are totally separate from religion, but for some are still interconnected to religion. In the case of Sumarah, for example, they could indeed be followers of Sumarah and at the same time become followers of a religion. This is what Stange portrays with Islam and *Kejawen*—specifically he conducted his research on Sumarah—as being two sides that interdependent with each other and therefore impossible to exclude one another.<sup>17</sup> Within Sumarah teaching itself, this also happens in a number of other *kepercayaan* organizations, it is possible for religious followers to become a follower of Sumarah. So that we do not need to be surprised if we meet followers of Sumarah as well as Islam. In such a case, they can choose in identity cards to be a religion or *kepercayaan*.

This situation gives us an illustration that tracing *Kejawen* group, although politically closer to the *kepercayaan* identity, some of them still can be found in religious identity. At least there are a number of reasons why this can happen. First, lived religion, the religion practiced by society, is not as fixed as religious identity on the identity card that totally separating religion and *kepercayaan*. Religion that lives in a society is more fluid than governed religion.<sup>18</sup> Second, there are some *kepercayaan* organizations that allow their followers to become followers of the religion, such as Sumarah. For some of them, this does not reduce religious sacredness. Third, after the 2017 Constitutional Court decision, does not make all *kepercayaan* practitioner automatically change their religious identity become *kepercayaan*. There are among those who politically (in an identity card) still follow a religion, but the essence of being followers of *kepercayaan*.

### **Kejawen: from Traveler to Academical Discourse**

The study of *Kejawen*, and Javanese Islam more generally, seems to have started by re-reading Clifford Geertz's work, *The Religion of*

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<sup>17</sup> Stange, P. *Kejawen Modern: Hakikat dalam Penghayatan Sumarah*. (Yogyakarta: LkiS, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Hurd, E. S. *Beyond Religious Freedom*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

*Java* (1960). Although this is not the first study, I will further discuss this issue later, but at least it can be a starting point in seeing how the way Javanese people express their religiosity (especially) Islam is represented in the academic world. Geertz's study, which chose the research location in Modjokuto, make conclusions which, although often criticized, are still very influential, namely the division of Javanese religion into three different variants: *santri*, *abangan*, and *priyayi*. He wrote:

*“The abangan religious tradition, made up primarily of the ritual feast called the slametan, of an extensive and intricate complex of spirit beliefs, and of a whole set of theories and practices of curing, sorcery, and magic. The purer Islam is the subtradition I have called santri. The santri religious tradition, consisting not only of a careful and regular execution of the basic rituals of Islam—the prayers, the Fast, the Pilgrimage—but also of a whole complex of social, charitable, and political Islamic organizations. The third is the priyaji. Priyaji originally referred only to the hereditary aristocracy which the Dutch pried loose from the kings of the vanquished native states and turned into an appointive, salaried civil service”.*<sup>19</sup>

From this work, we can see how academics view on the way Javanese practice their religion looks dichotomic. This has implications for the seemingly contradictory depictions of people as represented by 1) *santri* (representing groups considered to be pious) and 2) *abangan* (representing groups considered syncretic and animist). In this context, *priyayi* groups are excluded because they are considered not to represent religious aspect but rather represent the social class in Javanese social stratification.<sup>20</sup> That conclusion seems very simplistic and over-generalized.

In fact, when discussing *santri* (modernist and traditionalist), basically Geertz already has given a thick description. But it's quite unfortunate because the conclusion of *santri* seem normative *per se*,

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<sup>19</sup> Geertz, C. *The Religion of Java.....* 5-6

<sup>20</sup> Bachtiar, H. W. *The Religion of Java: A Commentary.* (Madjalah Ilmu-ilmu Sastra Indonesia, 1973). 65-115.

meanwhile, when discussing *abangan* he turns into syncretic view.<sup>21</sup> Such a view certainly makes Geertz's description rigid and fixed despite the fact that the way Javanese internalize and externalize religion practices is seemingly hybrid: a combination of normative and syncretic aspects at the same time. Actually, Geertz's dichotomic view is a legacy of the Western perspective in viewing Java.<sup>22</sup>

Boogert's dissertation entitled "*Rethinking Javanese Islam: Toward New Description of Javanese Traditions*" (2015) contributed valuable data in the process of tracking how Western perspectives constructed the discourse on Javanese Islam. What I do with these data is only to make a new interpretation and to emphasize that the academic construction we are receiving about the Javanese Islam today is not really new. The first source of Javanese Islam was obtained from the travelers' notes. Among them was Marco Polo who in the 13<sup>th</sup> portrayed Java:

*"The people there are subject to a powerful king, are idolaters, and pay tribute to any other prince. The territory is very rich, yielding pepper, nutmegs, galanga, cubebs, cloves, and all the richest spices".*<sup>23</sup>

The reason why Western travelers consider Java inhabited by idolsters is inseparable from the medieval situation of Europe which sees the world from a Biblical world perspective where they thought that Islam is understood as one particular kind of idolatry or false teaching (Boogert, 2015: 44).<sup>24</sup> This perspective understands theologically that Jesus has provided salvation for all mankind. This implication is no truth outside Christianity. It means Islam is considered a heresy, Muhammad is a false prophet, and of course Javanese are idolaters because they do not worship the Lord father, follow Jesus, and go to church.

However, the narration that said Java as idolaters little changed in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. The note from Tomé Pires, the Portuguese

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<sup>21</sup> Hilmy, M. Towards A Religiously Hybrid Identity? The Changing Face of Javanese Islam. *JOURNAL OF INDONESIAN ISLAM*, 2018). 45.

<sup>22</sup> Boogert, J. v. *Rethinking Javanese Islam*,.....4

<sup>23</sup> Murray, H. *The Travels of Marco Polo*. (New York: Harper, 1845).

<sup>24</sup> Boogert, J. v. *Rethinking Javanese Islam*,.....44



travelers, has begun to mention and compare ‘Moors’ and ‘Heathens’ (in Cortesão, 1820: 196). Another record about Cornelis de Houtman’s voyage also talked about ‘Mohammedan’ and ‘Heathen’ (in Ijzerman, 1929: 114). Term Moors has two possible meanings, first is Muslims in general or second only Arabs.<sup>25</sup> This word has at least provided a description of the existence of Muslims in Java since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, there are archaeological pieces of evidence that says Islam has come to the archipelago, and especially Java, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>26</sup> even some others mentioned since the 7<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>27</sup> but the interest in this review is not to show when Islam first came to the archipelago. This review aims to provide an overview of the construction of the dichotomic perspective on religion in Java.

This dichotomic paradigm has proven to be maintained and preserved until the Dutch orientalists, colonialists, and missionaries came. An example from the orientalists who can be put forward here is Raffles. He described Mohammedans in Java only on the surface and rebellious, but deep in their hearts, they were Javanese (Raffles, 1817: 5). The root of this religion is considered more appropriately referring to Hinduism and Buddhism, compared to Islam. Remember that Britain also colonized India, and thus this view more suited to British interests. This period also became a forerunner to the syncretic view of Javanese Islam as we can find in Brumund's (Dutch Protestant missionary) writings. He wrote, *“the Javanese Mohammedan believes that evil spirits live in such trees. He fears them, takes his fuming patera (?) there, and keeps his axe far away from them”*<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Boogert, J. v. *Rethinking Javanese Islam,.....*52

<sup>26</sup> Hurgronje, S. *De Islam in Nederlandsch-Indie 1913*. Bonn und Leipzig: Kurt Schroeder. 1913), 361

<sup>27</sup> Tjandrasmita, U. *Arkeologi Islam Nusantara*. Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2009). 13

<sup>28</sup> Brumund, J. F. *Berigten omtrent de evangelisatie van Java*. (Amsterdam: Van der Hey. 1854).

This period continues for the first time to find references that discuss the origin of the label *abangan* and *santri*. For example, let's see:

*“The number of santri (fancy and dilettante theologians) [that is religious students] is great and constantly grows. That is understandable, for [...] they are freed of compulsory services, which has greatly helped the spread of Muhammad’s ideas. [...] These santri and all who observe the prayer times are called ‘the white people’, ‘the holy people’, in contrast to the great multitude, who take no part in this and therefore are scornfully called ‘the red people’.”*<sup>29</sup>

At the time, *abangan* was a mockery conveyed by white people. But in fact, their lives are still mixed. Both *abangan* and the white people are actually difficult to distinguish at this time because of this label very fluid. Those who felt pious, especially because of the increase in the great pilgrimage in the 1880s<sup>30</sup> began to use the term *abangan* to refer to people who were deemed not pious. Until finally this dichotomic categorization was used again by Clifford Geertz as we can read in *The Religion of Java* (1960). This illustrates that the perspective that sees religion in Java in a dichotomic way between religion (not only Islam) and *Kejawen* as two contradictory thing is not a new narration.

This problem was realized by academics after Geertz. One of them is Andrew Beatty who saw that actually the religious way of the Javanese people was not really separate between the Islamic groups and the *Kejawen* groups. This is proven by multivocality in *slametan*<sup>31</sup> This Javanese tradition is a meeting point for every society regardless of their religious orientation, *santri* or *abangan*. Both of them are considered to represent different religious groups, but in fact, they can gather to create a harmonious situation.<sup>32</sup>

Other criticism that builds a different logic can be seen in Woodward's narration. He justified the legitimacy of the mysticism

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<sup>29</sup> Ricklefs, M. C. *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries*. (White Plains NY: Eastbridge, 2006). 41

<sup>30</sup> Ricklefs, M. C. *Mystic Synthesis in Java*,.....45

<sup>31</sup> Beatty, A. *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An anthropological account*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). 50

<sup>32</sup> Boogert, J. v. *The Role of Slametan in the Discourse of Javanese Islam. Indonesia and the Malay World*, 2017). 2

group (in this context has the same position as *Kejawen*) by tracing Islamic textual sources. Research conducted in Yogyakarta by looking at the way people express their life in the court, *slametan* and *labuhan* traditions, even architecture and various religious expressions of groups called *kebatinan* can actually get justification like sufistic expression in normative Islam (Woodward, 2011: 113; Woodward, 1989: 7). He seemed to want to say that no matter people became pure Javanese, in the fact they were still Muslims.

Woodward's work titled *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (1989) later received very sharp criticism from Ricklefs (Ricklefs, 1991: 184-190). He made a new label called mystic synthesis that means people who are interconnected from three identities: (1) Javanese identity that upholds Javanese culture; (2) Muslim identity; and (3) acceptance of belief in the highest spiritual reality, for example, Nyi Roro Kidul (Ricklefs, 2012: 30). This work like wants to illustrate that mysticism groups continue to face waves of Islamization in Indonesian history. This means, while he criticized Geertz and Woodward's dichotomy (Ricklefs, 2006: 35-55; Ricklefs, 2014: 397-416), he actually also accepted the dichotomy with a clearer historical explanation.

It must be noted that this view is not only found by outsider researchers but also insiders. For example, Kuntjaraningrat who has a view that in my opinion is exactly the same as Geertz's dichotomy. He mentioned that in Java there were *Agami Jawi* and *Agami Jawi Islam*.<sup>33</sup> *Agami Jawi* is another word of *abangan*, *kejawen*, mystic synthesis group, or other labels. Whereas *Agami Islam Jawi* is more like a *santri* group. This is also similar to the following Zoetmulder description:

*"Java and the Javanese underwent a tremendous impact of foreign ideas, of culture, of religious concepts, etc., but they were not swept away by them. They molded them in their own way. This might be called Hindu-Javanism, as much as what is now found may be called Islamic-Javanism"*<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Koentjaraningrat. *Javanese culture,.....* 312

<sup>34</sup> Zoetmulder, P. *The cultural background of Indonesian politics*. Colombia: Institute of International Studies University of South Carolina. 1967). 16

The study of *Kejawen* with all other labels above has become a specific discourse called Javanese Islam. In general, this discourse looks at the dynamics of Islam in Java. We can see how the dichotomic view in the academic world about the way Javanese people practiced religion has been created since the Portuguese travelers coming to Java and still repeated until the period of modern intellectuals. For me, this situation cannot be separated with orientalism study by placing all of the above sources in the context of not only dedication to knowledge, but also related to the interest of Dutch colonial until Indonesian state of the power in Java.<sup>35</sup> Knowledge then became the tool to maintain and manage power and occupation. The basic principle of this period is the spirit to define everything outside Europe<sup>36</sup>

In my opinion, the entire study above presupposes Javanese as a *sui generis* entity and has a distinctive marker in itself. Therefore, Javanese, in this context is *Kejawen*, beginning to be dichotomous and *vis-à-vis* distinguished from religion (not only Islam). This is the basis of all studies on Islam in Java. In fact, when discussing these dynamics in religious politics in Indonesia we also find the same dichotomic view as I discussed above. In fact, the way people practice religion is so fluid. This indicates that the religion discussed by academics may be different from the religion practiced by the community.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, the religion regulated by the state can also be different from the religion practiced by society. We must be aware of this situation when discussing religion in Java, specifically Javanese Islam.

## CONCLUSION

If we still see religion and *kepercayaan* as two completely separate things, then there are two possibilities. First, we are influenced by the political perspective as marked by the separation of religious identity

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<sup>35</sup> Said, E. *Orientalism*. (London: Penguin. 1978). 42

<sup>36</sup> Keppens, S. B. "Reconceptualizing the Postcolonial Project Beyond the Strictures and Structures of Orientalism." *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 2009). 54.

<sup>37</sup> Hurd, E. S. *Beyond Religious Freedom*..... 8

and *kepercayaan*. In fact, the way people express their religion is so fluid. Second, this perspective is a legacy of construction from Portuguese travelers, Western orientalist, Dutch missionary until contemporary academics. Both need to be understood as constructing a paradigm that cannot be separated from the purpose of knowledge to facilitate the formation and maintenance of power. Thus, when discussing Javanese Islam, specifically *Kejawen* or *Kepercayaan*, we must always look at empirical reality so that it does not become a misrepresentation because of various assumptions that shape our perspective on it.

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