N. Mulder
Abangan Javanese religious thought and practice


This PDF-file was downloaded from http://www.kitlv-journals.nl
The primary purpose of this article is to reduce the complexity of *abangan* Javanese religious thought and practice to an integrated description of its defining elements. The secondary purpose is to shed some light on aspects of everyday life and the relationship between individual and society.

*Abangan* Javanese

Comprising some sixty-five million speakers of Javanese, the Javanese constitute the largest single ethnic group in South-East Asia. The vast majority of them will profess themselves to be Muslims, but in practice there exists a remarkable cultural dividing-line between those who take their Muslim religious duties seriously and the majority who are *abangan*, that is, who do not live in accordance with the formal religious rules. The latter follow their own, Javanese, tradition (*kejawèn*), which is primarily the product of a syncretism of native animism and Hinduism with an admixture of Islam. These *abangan* tend to be deeply religious in their awareness of their participation in the unity of existence and dependence on an all-encompassing cosmic principle which regulates their lives.

Cosmological setting

*Abangan* Javanese conceive of human life as a manifestation of “The One”, that is, all-encompassing “Life”, or the principle of origin and destiny. Consequently the cosmic and social orders are of one and the
same kind, and the sacred, in its anthropocentric elaboration, is located as much in human society as in a wider cosmic context. This view is sustained by an elaborate mythology of Indian (mainly Mahabharata) inspiration, with which most Javanese are intimately acquainted because of the popularity of the wayang or shadow theatre, in which life on earth is depicted as a mere shadow of events and on a higher plane, as an inescapable fate in which all have to participate, imposing limits on destiny, purpose and volition. These limits find expression in the principle of pepesten, that is, the fact that everything has been foreordained and has to run its fixed course in accordance with the "cosmic law" (hence the Javanese fascination with prophecies, magical calculations and horoscopy).

Life exists all around, animating the cosmos and the earth, in constant flux, giving birth and re-absorbing, while human life is a mere way-side stop "where one pauses to have a drink". Life is as it must be, and should be accepted accordingly; it prescribes and rewards in the here-and-now, without any clear eschatological perspective, thus becoming a social and religious experience that is taken very seriously by most Javanese.

Key rituals
The great scheme of life is conceived of as an ordered and coordinated whole which individuals must accept and to which they must adapt themselves. They must try to be attuned with that which is greater than themselves and strive to be in a state of peace and emotional calm, slamet, which is "a state in which events will run their fixed course smoothly and nothing untoward will happen to anyone" (Koentja-raningrat 1960:95). To be slamet in the here-and-now is the very purpose of abangan socio-religious practice.

The core ritual in the attempt to sustain, maintain, or redress order is the slametan, that is, the communal socio-religious meal in which neighbours along with some relatives and friends participate. Such slametan are held at all life-crisis (from the eighth month of pregnancy to the thousandth day after death), at communal cyclical occurrences (especially the bersih-desa or annual village festival accompanied by certain purification rites), and on all sorts of occasions where the community’s well-being and equilibrium have been disturbed. At slametan all the participants enjoy the same ritual status, each person present contributing equally to the spiritual potency of the event. Such slametan therefore serve to demonstrate harmonious unity (rukun) among the participants while invoking the blessing of the gods, spirits and ancestors, who are formally invited to be present (Geertz 1960: 11-15, 30-85).

Wayang performances tend to accompany the most important slametan. The performer (dalang) functions as a representative of
“God”, projecting power and good fortune (slamet) to life on earth. This power-generating aspect of wayang is vividly demonstrated where a wayang play is staged for the express purpose of averting a mouse-plague threatening the harvest. At certain purification ceremonies that serve to release persons from involuntary states of affliction (ruwatan) the performance of a certain wayang play is even indispensable to undo the evil spell under which such persons have been born (Sukanda-Tessier 1977:228-34; Lind n.d.).

These key rituals serve to demonstrate the desire to be slamet through the attempt to achieve undisturbed continuity or to redress a disturbed equilibrium. They are not aimed at a better life, now or in the hereafter: their purpose is the maintenance of existing order and the constraint of danger. It also appears, however, that humans can play an active role in the maintenance of this order and can influence the orderly course of events, well-ordered social relationships being a means of and a condition for promoting the state of slamet. Consequently, it is difficult to separate social duty from religious obligation, and we have to look in the world view and ethics for further meaningful religious elaboration. Only then will it be possible for the more individual-centred mystical practice of Javanese religion to be clarified and the plurality of abangan religious expression to be understood.

**World view and ethics**

**a. Hierarchy: the continuity of life**

The basic model for the order of Life is provided by the living order of the family. It is the moral obligation of every adult to ensure the continuity of life within Life, to marry and to have offspring. Parents represent life; being born before their children, they are in a superior moral position and have the duty to care for their children from before birth until they are married. Parents have the duty to see to it that their children “become human” (dadi wong), that is, become fully Javanese, with an adequate knowledge of Javanese manners, customs and culture, in order to become accepted and respected members of the community. Consequently, children should obey their parents, following their advice and honouring them.

Such honour is expressed through respectful language and, most importantly, through the custom in connection with Lebaran whereby children visit their parents (and other superiors) to ask their forgiveness and seek their blessing. Moreover, after death, when parents have become respected ancestors, their graves should be visited; here the parents’ merit is conceived of as flowing like a white magical force to their children, who will pray to them and seek their blessing.

These rituals are important devices for maintaining or restoring equilibrium and ensuring social harmony. In the connected hierarchical social order, in which everyone is identified by relative position, respect
for one's superiors is a cardinal moral requirement. To respect hierarchy is to respect Life, which notion is elaborated in the notion that to honour older siblings, parents, teachers (guru; kyai) and the ruler is equivalent to honouring "God".

Parents are supposed to sacrifice themselves for their children's benefit and to care about their well-being. They are aware of the vicissitudes of life and of the precariousness of its order. To ensure the required state of slamet they should consciously cultivate an attitude of solicitude (prihatin), which is often achieved through minor forms of ascetic practice. Such ascetism taking the form of fasting, prayer and abstinence, serves to "strengthen their souls" and to ensure the success of their efforts, the well-being of their children being the object in this particular case. In addition they should of course also actively strive to achieve the desired results.

Children, in their turn, should honour their parents by living up to the requirements imposed by their parents' status and reputation in the community. They should mikul duwur, mendem jero, mikul duwur meaning literally "to carry high", namely the good name and moral irreproachability of their parents and other relatives, by praising the parents' goodness and extolling the inner harmony of family life, and mendem jero meaning "to bury deeply", i.e. anything that might betray disharmony, aggressive feelings, or whatever else is felt to be negative about family life, especially in the relationship between parents and children. Conflicts should be kept concealed inside and are not for public display. On the positive side insiders should observe rukun, that is, cultivate harmonious relations and practise the art of give-and-take, of compromise, while also spontaneously sacrificing ego drives (pamrih) in order to be able to enjoy the well-being (slamet) that ensues from harmonious relations.

The worst a child can do is to not honour his parents, not accept their advice, and not seek their consent for marriage, thereby hurting their feelings. Such behaviour is believed to constitute a sinful act against the moral order of life and to be likely to provoke walat (heaven-sent retribution). The fear of walat, be it in the form of a curse or as an automatic karma-like punishment, is one of the best safeguards ensuring the maintenance of ordered relations. Moreover, a person who fails to honour his deceased parents at their graves is not well thought of, while subjecting himself to kesiku, that is, the supernatural sanction punishing neglect with regard to whatever is sacred.

b. Community

The ethic of family life should also be the community ethic; it involves acceptance of paternalistic leadership, mutual assistance, observance of rukun, and attendance of each other's life-crisis rituals. If one is respectful to others, one will be respected in turn, according to one's
position and social status; if one helps others, one will be helped; if one shows an interest on the occasions of birth, illness, and other important events, people will come to visit one and return the interest shown. Man is not alone and needs others to pursue the business of life. When visited by others one should show congeniality and tolerance and an interest in the well-being and wishes of these others, and the parties should ritually meet one another according to the rules of custom (adat) and propriety (tatakrama). Being respectful to others means to be accepted and respected in return and is essential for maintaining proper order while achieving slamet.

Consequently open conflict should be avoided, it always being wise to conform. Ambition, the search for personal gain and competitiveness are regarded as being disruptive to the communal order and contrary to the requirements of harmony and equilibrium. Neither personal needs nor personal ideological (religious or political) views should be stressed, the good individual being a tolerant person, who is willing to help and prepared to compromise and not bent on forcing his own beliefs upon others. The person who goes his own way, ignoring the expectations of others, is subject to strong social criticism and may eventually be ostracized altogether.

Of all the communal obligations, the obligation to participate in death rituals is the most compelling. Lack of sympathy at this sorrowful and most crucial event in the human life cycle is regarded as an extreme sign of disrespect, which will result in exclusion from community affairs, with the consequence that other members of the community will ignore that person's invitations to attend his slametans and refuse him help when needed. It places the person concerned outside the ritual and social pale and beyond honour, and causes his social death. This kind of repudiation is the social means of redefining the boundaries within which rukun and the state of slamet should prevail.

The quintessence of the communal ethic is expressed by the maxim tepa slira, which means not to do to others that which one does not wish to have done to oneself. It involves respect and tolerance for one's fellows, self-effacement, modesty and restraint despite superior position (aja dumèh), unwillingness to cause loss of face to anyone, and control of oneself while going with the flow (ngèli). This attitude of passivity is recognized as the means of maintaining personal and communal equilibrium and as being conducive to attainment to the rather negatively defined state of slamet. People are educated to seek the establishment of social harmony and to believe in the benefits of ordered relations and social control and overt self-effacement.

Whether in the family or in the wider community, social relations should be well-ordered and predictable. As long as everyone observes
the social rules imposed by hierarchy and community, order and slamet will prevail. In order to achieve this social harmony individuals should sacrifice themselves and submit to social control and act in accordance with social expectations. They should conduct themselves as civilized persons who know their place and the correct manners, who are careful not to hurt other people's feelings and avoid conflicts at all times. The ensuing state of peacefulness (slamet) is believed to be conducive to a state of personal emotional calm (ayem).

The institutionalized state of prihatin, however, reveals that there is even so much to worry about and that outward appearances do not necessarily reflect inner feelings. Moreover, the pressure on people to act in conformity with social expectations may be experienced as a considerable burden. Individuals are therefore advised to practise minor forms of asceticism (tirakat) in order to strengthen their "soul" and to be acquiescent (nrima) and patient (sabar) in facing life's adversities. After all, society controls one's outward behaviour (lair), one's appearance and one's conduct, and to be socially effective a strong inner personality (batin) is needed. Moreover, deep down one is acknowledged to be free, with the right to one's own feelings, beliefs and opinions.

Individual articulation: kebatinan

Kebatinan (from batin: inner, secret, hidden) refers to the cult of the inner man and is the general word for magical and religious mysticism. The inner man is conceived of as a microcosm (jagat cilik) in relation to the macrocosm (jagat gedé) that is Life, the mystical adept striving to achieve harmony and ultimately unity with this all-encompassing principle (manunggaling kawula-Gusti), with his origin and his destination (sangkan-paran). To become such an adept one will follow a teacher (guru), one's first teacher often being one's father, who is subsequently replaced by other teachers, until ultimately "God" or Life itself takes over.

The mystical adept should be without social purpose or egoism (pamrih) but should be motivated to live in tune with Life and destiny (other kinds of mysticism being judged impure and magical). Social life and its ritual requirements, including participation in the rituals of the formal, "official" religions (sarèngat), are mere outward forms, useful as a kind of disciplinary practice, but representing far from true forms of religious expression. It is the cultivation of the inner individuality, of the true I (ingsun sejati), screened off from the outward forms of social expression, that is the object of the practice of kebatinan. In that practice one is free, society being tolerant about individual religious thought and expression. In kebatinan one seeks to achieve true unity with Life, as well as personal equilibrium through the practice of austerities and meditation. Moreover, this practice
functions as a frequently used method of sublimation of frustrations (Mulder 1980).

This recognition of the inner individual life is sustained by the belief that everyone is and should be his own saviour. This belief also sets people apart from one another in their experience of social life, every man being morally and ethically an island to himself, unless he identifies totally with his social role and position. Whatever the case, everyone has the right to go his own "religious" way as long as he respects the social order. By disconnecting social role from individual experience the Javanese have a possibility of achieving remarkable religious depth in individual expression, as it were bypassing social requirements in their quest for direct unity with the All. This type of disconnection between one’s individuality and one’s social conduct appears to be a common feature in Indianized South-East Asia, although its expressions are extremely diverse (cf. Mulder 1979).

The practice of kejawèn mysticism, in its various forms and expressions, is a recognized way of achieving individual freedom from hierarchical and communal social pressures. Often the more horizontal bonds among individuals appear to be weakly developed, even the bond of marriage tending to be unreliable. Man is essentially alone and should be his own saviour. Mysticism involves the realization of one’s true self. Socially one is forced into a certain role and into a civilized appearance; it is the other side of existence, however, that serves as compensation for this while giving the individual the necessary strength to maintain social harmony. Both aspects are taken equally seriously, though ultimately one’s relation to the “really real” is recognized as constituting the “true” dimension of life.

Plurality of abangan religious expression

Javanese abangan religion is preoccupied with the unity of existence. In its ritual expression it focuses on the harmonious unity of the group concerned, whether this be the family, the neighbourhood, or the village community. Within the boundaries of these respective groups slamet should prevail and order be maintained, which leaves little freedom for individual deviation. Beyond these groups moral behaviour tends to become uncertain, outsiders observing different customs while having different reference groups. Vis-à-vis outsiders one should be tolerant and friendly but suspicious.

The focus of abangan religion in its mystical expression is on the individual’s personal and direct relation with “The One”. In this relationship one is free to follow one’s idiosyncratic inclinations. The more sophisticated and refined mystical systems are typically elaborations by urban intellectuals and members of the administrative elite.
(priyayi), but mysticism is by no means restricted to these groups. In its more simple and often magical forms it is widespread among the abangan population both in the countryside and the towns.

The strength of the interest in mysticism seems to fluctuate with the changing social conditions, and the examples of millenarian mystical movements under some charismatic religious teacher that have sprung up in protest against oppression are legion (Kartodirdjo 1973). The turbulent period of the past thirty to forty years has also witnessed the emergence of a great many mystical movements, which are often to be understood as manifestations of a search for self-expression and meaning in a chaotic age, and sometimes even as a modern form of organization with the object of revitalizing the Javanese cultural heritage (Mulder 1980:1-12).

Under the influence of modern developments the family and community observance of religious practices has suffered and become simplified, the world view and ethic described above being typical rather of the "parental generation", although they are by no means things of the past. Because of the erosion of traditional values and their meaningful articulation, congregational and more universal "modern" religions (especially Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism) now appear to attract many of the younger generation.

Interest in things religious is typically strong among the Javanese, and membership of one of the "official" religions does not prevent one from being a mystic at heart, the abangan mentality being intrinsically syncretistic, accommodating the diversity of expression in a way that makes for the unity of Life.

REFERENCES

Geertz, Clifford

Kartodirdjo, Sartono

Koentjaraningrat, R. M.

Lind, Elisabeth
n.d. The Ideal Equilibrium, Paper published by the Department of Anthropology, University of Stockholm.

Mulder, Niels

Sukanda-Tessier, Viviane