

The Javanese *Slametan* as Practiced as Tradition and Identity

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Abstract

Tradition can be understood as the handing down of local knowledge, statements, practices, beliefs, legends, customs, information, from generation to generation, especially by word of mouth or by practice, or something that is handed down, a long-established or inherited way of thinking or acting. It is an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior, as a religious practice or a social custom. Meanwhile, identity may be described as "The state or fact of being the same one; the state or fact of remaining the same one, as under varying aspects or conditions; the condition of being oneself or itself, and not another; the condition or character that distinguishes a person or a thing." In one society tradition and identity can be related one to each other since one major tradition could be considered as one prominent identity to this society. An enduring tradition may generate a meaningful identity to one society. It is believed that that tradition is a conscious model of past lifeways that people use in the construction of their identity. One example of tradition discussed here is the Javanese slametan, which is practiced from generation to generation whether by the Javanese who live in Java island or those who live in other areas, which include outer islands such as Bali, Madura, Sumatra, and Kalimantan as well as in the Netherlands Suriname.

Key Words: Javanese, culture, tradition, identity, belief, ritual, pray

1. Introduction

Tradition can be understood as the handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs, information, etc., from generation to generation, especially by word of mouth or by practice, or something that is handed down, a long-established or inherited way of thinking or acting. It is an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior, as a religious practice or a social custom (*Random House Dictionary*, 2013; *Collins English Dictionary*, 2009; *Dictionary.com*, LLC. © 2013). A tradition is a belief or behavior passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past (Green, 1997). Traditions can persist and evolve for thousands of years - the word "tradition" itself derives from the Latin *tradere* or *traderer* literally meaning to transmit, to hand over, to give for safekeeping. While it is commonly assumed that traditions have ancient history, many traditions have been invented on purpose, whether that be political or cultural, over short periods of time (*Wikipedia*, 2016).

In its literal sense, tradition refers to any human practice, belief, institution or artefact which is handed down from one generation to the next. While the content of tradition is highly variable, it typically refers to some element of culture regarded as part of the common inheritance of a social group. Tradition is often regarded as a source of social stability and legitimacy, but appeals to tradition may also provide the basis of changing the present (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, 1988: 255). According to Linnekin, "Tradition includes elements from the past, but this 'past' is equivocal: it does not correspond to the experience of any particular generation... Tradition is fluid; its content is redefined by each generation and its timelessness may be situationally constructed (Linnekin, 1983), while "the selection of what constitutes tradition is always made in the present; the content of the past is modified and redefined according to a modern significance" (Eisenstadt, 1973: 23).

One example of tradition discussed here is the Javanese *slametan*, which is practiced from generation to generation whether by the Javanese who live in Java island or those who live in other areas, which include outer islands such as Bali, Madura, Sumatra, and Kalimantan as well as in the Netherlands Suriname. Identity may be described as “The state or fact of being the same one; the state or fact of remaining the same one, as under varying aspects or conditions; the condition of being oneself or itself, and not another; the condition or character that distinguishes a person or a thing” (*New Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language*, 1985: 475). Identity can also be equated to “distinctiveness, existence, individuality, oneness, particularity, personality, self, selfhood, singularity, uniqueness; sameness, unity” (*The Collins Thesaurus in A-Z Form*, 1990: 329). In this discussion, the Javanese *Slametan* is considered not only as a distinctive and unique socio-religious ritual as practiced by the Javanese but also as a traditional media which identifies the spiritual and social expression of the Javanese. As a traditional media the *Slametan* unifies and harmonizes the Javanese communities as collectivities.

In one society tradition and identity can be related one to each other since one major tradition could be considered as one prominent identity to this society. An enduring tradition may generate a meaningful identity to one society. Linnekin (1983) believes that tradition is a conscious model of past lifeways that people use in the construction of their identity. Worrying about the direction of the future of his Muslim society a wise Turk intellectual, Ibrahim Kalin (2011) warned, “most Muslim societies have lost their sense of the tradition, the integrity of their social and cultural identity, and ended up with schizophrenic identities.” He continues, “One of the grave consequences of top-down modernization in the Muslim world has been the loss of tradition and with it the confusion of identity. In the name of modernizing themselves and catching up with the brave new world, pre-modern societies have turned against their tradition and in some cases destroyed some of the world’s greatest treasures.” According to Kalin, “Tradition is not about repetition but about continuity. It is about maintaining roots so that one can have fruits. No human community uprooted from its life-world can remain normal.

When Muslim societies began to modernize under pressure from Western modernity, they lost the integrity of their traditional identities.” The Javanese *Slametan* consists of meaningful elements of culture which indicate the power of a traditional identity amidst the waves of global and modern values and practices supported by elaborate management and technology of post-modern societies. These modern values and practices have marginalized and removed large portions of Javanese traditional identities such as language (*basa Jawa*) and etiquette (*tata krama*); however, the practice of *slametan* remains intact. Nevertheless, confirming Linnekin’s statements (1983), *Slametan* “includes elements from the past, but this past is equivocal...,” *slametan* is fluid; its content is redefined by each generation and its timelessness may be situationally constructed.” As well, it is mostly true that, approving Eisenstadt’s account, the selection of what constitutes *slametan* as a traditional identity “is always made in the present; the content of the past is modified and redefined according to a modern significance” (Eisenstadt, 1973: 23).

2. Javanese People

Since its proclamation in 1945 and recognition by the international community in 1949, the Republic of Indonesia, where Java island is located – in which the Javanese people live, has introduced a model of unique religious tolerance, which allows religious pluralism to grow freely. As a country founded after World War II, Indonesia is indeed a new phenomenon. Before the proclamation of independence in 1945, there was no Indonesia. The proclamation of independence in 1945 marked the beginning of a new nation in the world named Indonesia. It is against this background that the model of religious tolerance is unique. Being aware that this new nation has to practice justice to all of its citizens, regardless of their religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the founders of the nation wanted religious freedom to be the foundation of this new nation (Titaley in Pye, et. al. 2006: 129). The Javanese are an ethnic group native to the Indonesian island of Java. At approximately 90 million people, they form the largest ethnic group in Indonesia. They are predominantly located in the central and eastern parts of the island. There are also significant Javanese descents in most Provinces of Indonesia, in Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, the Netherlands, and Suriname. Even though the majority of the Javanese identify themselves as Muslims, their civilization has been influenced for a millennium of interactions between the native animism and the Indian Hindu-Buddhist culture: there are records of their influences in Javanese history and culture, including traditions and identities, such as *slametan* (Harjawiya & Supriya, 2001: 185). Clifford Geertz (1960) divided the Javanese society into 3 (three) *aliran* (streams) which he termed as The “Abangan” Variant, The “Santri” Variant, and The “Priajji” Variant.

In his analysis, he described the *Abangan* as “representing a stress on the animistic aspects of the over-all Javanese syncretism and broadly related to the peasant element in the population; *santri*, representing a stress on the Islamic aspects of the syncretism and generally related to the trading element (and to certain elements in the peasantry as well); and *prijaji*, stressing the Hinduist aspects and related to the bureaucratic element” (Geertz, 1960: 4-7). However, Geertz’s opinion is often criticized because he mixed the social category with belief category. It was not easy to localize this social categorization in classing outsiders, such as other ethnic groups as the Arab, Chinese, and Indian descent.

Concerning the religious tradition of Java, particularly of the peasantry, Geertz summarized as “a composite of Indian, Islamic, and indigenous Southeast Asian elements” and “the result was a balanced syncretism of myth and ritual in which Hindu gods and goddesses, Moslem prophets and saints, and local spirits and demons all found a proper place.” While in the context of locating *slametan* as the *Abangan* core ritual he concluded, “The central ritual form in this syncretism is a communal feast, called the *slametan* (Geertz, 1973: 147).

3. *Slametan: Function, Practice and Meaning*

From his field work in Modjokuto (Pare) in 1950s Clifford Geertz locates *slametan* in the context of the social life of The “Abangan” Variant. In his book *The Religion of Java* (1960), Part One: The “Abangan” Variant, Geertz opens his remarks in Chapter 1: The *Slametan* Communal Feast as a Core Ritual, with the following description.

At the center of the whole Javanese religious system lies a simple, formal, undramatic, almost furtive, little ritual: the *slametan* (also sometimes called a *kenduren*). The *slametan* is 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. Friends, neighbors, fellow workers, relatives, local spirits, dead ancestors, and near-forgotten gods all get bound, by virtue of their commensality, into a defined social group pledged to mutual support and cooperation. In Modjokuto the *slametan* forms a kind of social universal joint, fitting the various aspects of social life and individual experience together in a way which minimizes uncertainty, tension, and conflict – or at least it is supposed to do so. The altered form of twentieth-century urban and suburban life in Java makes it rather less efficient as an integrating mechanism and rather less satisfying as a religious experience for many people; but among the group here described as *abangan* – the more traditionalized peasants and their proletarianized comrades in the towns – the *slametan* still retains much of its original force and attraction (Geertz, 1960: 11).

Geertz (1960) categorizes *slametan* into four main types: first, those relating to the crises of life, such as birth, circumcision, marriage, and death; second, those associated with events of the Islamic calendar; third, the *bersih désa* (cleaning of the village), concerned with the social integration of the village; and forth, those held irregularly depending on unusual occurrences: departing for a long trip, moving residence, changing personal names, illness, sorcery, and so on. He observes as follows. A *slametan* can be given in response to almost any occurrence one wishes to celebrate, ameliorate, or sanctify. Birth, marriage, sorcery, death, house moving, bad dreams, harvest, name-changing, opening a factory, illness, supplication of the village guardian spirit, circumcision, and starting off a political meeting may all occasion a *slametan* (Geertz, 1960: 11). The ceremony takes its name from the Javanese word *slamet*, from Arabic *salam*, safe - which refers to a peaceful state of equanimity, in which nothing will happen. This is what the host intends for both himself and his guests, by experiencing the egalitarian structure of the *slametan* and the petitions of supernatural protection from spirits.

As the practice of the *slametan* he notes as the following. For each the emphasis is slightly different. One part or another of the total ritual is intensified and elaborate; another part is toned down. The mood changes somewhat, but the underlying structure of the ritual remains the same. There is always the special food (differing according to the intent of the *slametan*); there is always incense, the Islamic chant, and the extra-formal high-Javanese speech of the host (its content, too, naturally, varying with the occasion); and there is always the polite, embarrassed, muted manner which suggests that, despite the brevity and lack of drama the ritual displays, something important is going on (Geertz, 1960: 11-12).

Why do Javanese hold *slametans*? For Javanese, the *slametan* is quite meaningful. Interviewed by Geertz, an old bricklayer gave two reasons: “When you gave a *slametan*, nobody feels any different from any one else and so they don’t want to split up. Also a *slametan* protects you against the spirits, so they will not upset you.” At a *slametan* everyone is treated the same. The result, Geertz analyzes, is that no one feels different from anyone else, no one feels lower than anyone else, and so no one has a wish to split off from the other person.

Also, after you have given a *slametan*, the local spirits will not bother you, will not you make feel ill, unhappy, or confused. The goals are negative and psychological – absence of aggressive feeling toward others, absence of emotional disturbance. The wished-for state is *slamet*, which the Javanese defines with the phrase “*gak ana apa-apa*” – “there isn’t anything,” “nothing is going to happen (to anyone)” (Geertz, 1960: 14).

In a high rank philosophical Javanese language, *krama inggil*, *slametan* can be contemplated as a socio-cultural attempt of *Memayu Hayuning Bawana*, Beautifying the Beauty of the Universe – which is to harmonize the horizontal as well as vertical relations of human to human, human to nature, and human to the Almighty Creator.



A slametan in a mosque in Java during colonial period (Wikipedia, May 2016).



(Slametan/seperang-0341.jpg.link)

4. Preserving Traditions and Identities

4.1. Slametan of Urang Gunung and Urang Pasar Styles

Slametan is not only experienced by Javanese communities who live in Java island. Two ethnic groups in the South Kalimantan community studied by Mary Hawkins – east and central Javanese transmigrants and the indigenous Banjar – are heirs to distinct and different *slametan* traditions. Interaction between the two groups, however, has created new styles of *slametan* as traditions are modified to serve contemporary interests (Alexander, 1989: vi).

The *urang gunung*, Javanese transmigrants engaged in rice and clove farming, draw on the Javanese tradition of small and frequent exchanges of food to constitute communities from the initially arbitrary territorial groupings to which they were assigned. The *urang pasar*, traders and civil servants including both Javanese and Banjar, stage less frequent but much larger and more elaborate *slametan* which underwrite the social prestige of the host by demonstrating his generosity.

Slametan symbolically constitute the two communities and serve important social functions within them, but the efforts of the *urang pasar* to meet community expectations are increasingly at odds with the national ideology of development which treats such rituals as anachronistic (Alexander, 1989: vi-vii). The study of Mary Hawkins concentrates on the creation of a *slametan* tradition in Gunung Makmur, a south Kalimantan transmigration community. Gunung Makmur's population comprises two major ethnic groups – central and eastern Javanese, and local Banjar – both of which have distinct and different *slametan* traditions. However, although villagers are well aware of the differences between Javanese and Banjar *slametan* traditions, it is not the case that Gunung Makmur Javanese hold only Javanese style *slametan*; and Gunung Makmur Banjar hold only Banjar style *slametan*. Rather, Gunung Makmur Javanese and Banjar perceive their village as consisting of two communities, the *urang gunung* or mountain people, all of whom are Javanese, and the *urang pasar* or market people, who include Banjar, Javanese, Madurese, even Batak. The *pasar* and *gunung* communities each have a distinct *slametan* style. Javanese tradition is unmistakably the source of the *gunung slametan* style, but the *pasar slametan* style, although predominantly Banjar, also incorporates Javanese elements and, increasingly, is constituted with reference to Indonesian national ideology. The focus of this ethnographic study includes the manner in which Gunung Makmur villagers have created distinct *pasar* and *gunung slametan* styles, the content of these, and their association with the *pasar* and *gunung* communities (Hawkins, 1989: 159-74).

4. 2. Surinam Javanese *Slametan*

The Javanese communities in the Netherlands Suriname, who first at 9 August 1890 went ashore in Suriname, have been striving to preserve their traditions and ethnic identities. The desire to maintain and develop the Javanese culture can be seen in their efforts to pass down Javanese language, traditions and other cultural identities from one generation to another. Shadow puppetry, *gamelan* orchestra, *jaran kepong* (horse dance), *tayuban* (folk dance), as well as performing ceremonies like *slametan*, celebrating the end of the fasting month (*lebaran* or *bodo*), wedding, *mitoni* (seventh month of pregnancy) and circumcision, are some of the ethnic traditions and identities that have been preserved. Like in Java, they also have persons with special skills to perform these ceremonies, e.g. *dukun bayi* (birth attendant), *dukun manten* (for wedding ceremony) and *dukun sunat* (for circumcision) (Koesoebjono, 2001) (Detail account on the *Slametan among Surinamese Javanese Muslims* is presented by Khusen, 2005/2009).

4.3. *Slametan* in Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra

Another recorded cultural study on the *slametan* tradition among the Javanese communities is carried out by Ayu Febryani (2011) of Study Program of Anthropology Education, Faculty of Social Sciences, State University of Medan (Unimed). Her observation on the tradition of *slametan* among the Javanese in a village in Deli Serdang is to answer a set of questions which includes the interpretation of the Javanese villagers in Desa Tembung of the meaning of *slametan* ritual; the important meaning of *slametan* to these villagers; the procession and the relations of *slametan* in this village to the teachings of Islam (Febriani, 2011).

5. Closing

I would like to note that the Javanese *slametan* has been attracted scholars and researchers to pay attention by engaging studies, not only on the Javanese communities who live in Java island, but also on other Javanese communities at other locations as far from Java island as Kalimantan, Sumatra, and even the Netherlands Surinam. From these studies it is obvious that wherever the Javanese live they keep preserving their traditions and identities which may even influence other ethnic communities. Profound cultural traditions and identities conforming to human spiritual and social needs remain intact as long as supported by their participants. The Javanese *slametan* will not be mildewed by the ages. Semarang, September 2016.

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