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Localising Christianity

Negotiating Dominant Discourses in Transnational Spaces

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Abstract

Dutch missionaries active in nineteenth century Java (in the former Dutch Indies) found themselves in an exceptional position, namely on the borders between their own, the colonial, and local cultures. This gave them a unique perspective on a range of processes in the colony, but it also made their proselytizing task that much harder. They felt restricted by cultural barriers and constantly had to negotiate with all sides involved. This paper shows how both the missionaries and Javanese Christians negotiated in the transnational space in their attempt to intersect the Christian with the Javanese identity.

Résumé

Les missionnaires hollandais actifs à Java au 19ème siècle (dans les anciennes Indes orientales néerlandaises) se trouvèrent dans une situation exceptionnelle, à la frontière de leur propre culture, de la culture coloniale, et de la culture locale. Ceci leur donna un point de vue unique sur une série de processus en cours dans la colonie, mais rendit aussi leur travail de prosélytisme plus difficile. Ils se sentirent contraints par les barrières culturelles et durent constamment négocier avec toutes les parties impliquées. Le présent article montre comment les missionnaires et les chrétiens javanais ont négocié dans l'espace transnational les modalités d'une rencontre entre identité javanaise et identité chrétienne.

Keywords

transnational space – localization of Christianity – Javanese agency – discursive strategies – reading against the grain

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Mots-clés

espace transnational – localisation du christianisme – agencéité javanaise – stratégies discursives – lecture à contre-courant

In the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Christian congregations arose in different parts of Java as a consequence of enduring interaction between Dutch missionaries and the Javanese and Sundanese people.[1] These communities were, however, not duplicates from Dutch Christian congregations. Most Javanese converts aimed at the localization of Christianity and persistently negotiated with the missionaries about the continuance of diverse Javanese practices.[2] A Javanese version of Christianity was, however, difficult to accept for the majority of the Dutch ánd non-Christian Javanese. While the intersection of a 'true' Javanese and a 'true' Christian identity was the formal aim of the Christian mission, this turned out to be an unattainable ideal. In order to become 'true' Christians in the eyes of the Dutch, converts were expected to give up beliefs and customs that were essential for the Javanese identity. Converts who gave up their parts of their *adat* stopped being 'true Javanese' and became 'Dutch' in the eyes of their Muslim neighbours.[3] Consequently, the Christian and Javanese identity were considered conflicting by both parties and Javanese Christians felt caught between two worlds. This is confirmed by a then commonly heard expression among the Javanese to describe converts: "*Landa wurung, Jawa tanggung*", which means: not Dutch enough and not fully Javanese anymore.[4] The first aim of this paper is to analyse the negotiations between Dutch missionaries and Javanese converts in forming a true Javanese Christian identity.

The boards of the Dutch mission organizations had strong ideas of what the church in the Dutch Indies should be. They considered their Christian beliefs and rituals universal and dismissed local adaptations as syncretic. There was always a discrepancy between the boards in the Netherlands and the missionaries active in the field, because the latter realized quickly that Christianity in

1 The Sundanese people are native to the Western part of Java.

2 The concept localization reflects the anthropological interest in local particularity and the ability of societies to resist and transform external forces. W. Keane, *Christian moderns, freedom and fetish in the mission encounter*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, p. 91.

3 *Adat* is local customary law in Indonesia.

4 Kristanto Budiprabowo, *Sadrach, early leader in the history of Javanese Christianity*, unpublished thesis, Yogyakarta, 2010.

the colony had to adapt to local circumstances, or at least in the initial phase of the mission. Consequently, the missionaries found themselves in a complicated position, where they had to reconcile the often contradictory wishes of their employer and of the local population, while still producing sufficient quantitative results. The missionaries witnessed their congregation internalizing Christian beliefs into their lives, but noticed that previous traditions were often still present. They were aware that they were supposed to avoid such localized expressions of Christianity, but also knew that they had to relent and include some of the local customs in the communities they led. They were compelled to compromise and to justify their 'unorthodox' choices to their employers. The second aim of this paper is to show how the missionaries justified such choices to the boards back in the Netherlands.

The focus in this paper will mainly be on two missionaries of the Protestant *Nederlandsche Zendelinggenootschap* (Dutch Missionary Society, NZG) and one missionary of the Protestant *Nederlandsche Zendingsvereeniging* (Dutch Missionary Association, NZV) who were active in Java in the second half of the nineteenth century.[5] Samuel Eliza Harthoorn (1831–1883) was one of the first NZG missionaries who was sent to Java to evangelise. He arrived in East Java in 1854 and after two years of intensive study of the local languages in Modjo Warno he was assigned to his own district: Malang, a city in South-east Java. Seven years later this headstrong missionary left Java after a severe conflict with the board. In 1855, Carel Poensen (1836–1919) of the NZG left for Java with his wife after five years of training. After spending two years under the supervision of another missionary to improve his Javanese and to assist in the mission work, he was assigned to the district of Kediri, a small city in South-East Java. Poensen lived and worked there for more than thirty years. The missionary Christiaan Albers (1837–1920) joined the NZV that was active in West Java in 1859. Albers started his mission in the district of Cianjur from 1862 until 1886 and then moved to Meester Cornelis, a small village which is now part of the suburbs of Jakarta, and worked there until his retirement in 1907 without many accomplishments.[6]

After contextualizing the Dutch mission enterprise in Java theoretically and historically I will analyse the negotiations in the transnational space and explore to what extent the missionaries really adhered to the official guidelines

5 Missionaries of the Protestant missionary societies were usually lower educated. This applies to Harthoorn, Poensen and Albers as well. Higher educated members of the societies received a seat in the board and were not sent overseas.

6 The present name of Meester Cornelis is Jatinegara.

of their organizations and, if not, how they legitimized their choices deviating from these. The following paragraphs focus on the specific cultural aspects which were most often subject to debate in the transnational communities: *gamelan* orchestras, *wayang* plays, the *slametan*, and circumcision. The Protestant missionaries had very different ideas about these practices; some sought to ban them from their Christian communities while others argued to allow them after some adjustments. The last paragraph deals with the institution of marriage within the Christian communities. The missionaries realised that Javanese marriage practices differed from Dutch-Christian marriage practices and were, for example, unsure how to deal with arranged marriages, child marriages, divorce, or mixed marriages.

The Protestant missionary archives have been studied primarily for the publication of bibliographies and memorial books by members of these societies.[7] The personal archives of the missionaries have not been used much to study the lives of the missionaries. Only a few doctoral theses have been written on key figures in the Dutch mission, such as Gerrit Noort's study on the life of Albert C. Kruyt.[8] Merle C. Ricklefs has studied the Protestant archives to write about the changing religious landscape of nineteenth century Java and most important, Dutch missiologist Karel Steenbrink has researched both Protestant and Catholic mission archives which culminated in, among others, an eloquent study on Dutch colonialism and its perception of Javanese Islam and several comprehensive studies on the history of Catholicism in Indonesia.[9] However, the Javanese perception of the Dutch mission has remained understudied. Unfortunately, sources written by the Javanese about their encounter with Dutch missionaries are scarce and because of this lack of indigenous

7 E.g. Th. van den End, *De Nederlandsche Zendingsvereeniging in West Java, 1858–1963*, Alphen aan den Rijn, 1991. Th. van den End, Chr. G.F. de Jong, A.Th. Boone, P.N. Holtrop, *Twee eeuwen Nederlandse zending 1797–1997. Twaalf opstellen*, Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1997. Chr.G.F. de Jong, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Zending en Overzeese Kerken: Midden-Java 1859–1931*, Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1997. Hommo Reenders, *De Gereformeerde Zending in Midden-Java 1859–1931*, Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2001.

8 Gerrit Noort, *De weg van magie tot geloof, Leven en werk van Alb. C. Kruyt (1869–1948), zendeling-leraar in Midden-Celebes, Indonesië*, Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2006.

9 Merle Calvin Ricklefs, *Polarizing Javanese Society, Islamic and other visions (c. 1830–1930)*, Leiden: KITLV Press, 2007. Karel Steenbrink, *Dutch colonialism and Indonesian Islam, contacts and conflicts 1596–1950*, Amsterdam: Rodopi 2006. Karel Steenbrink, *Catholics in Indonesia, a documented history 1808–1942, Volume 1, A modest recovery 1808–1903*, Leiden: KITLV Press, 2007. Karel Steenbrink, *Catholics in Indonesia, a documented history 1808–1942, Volume 2, The spectacular growth of a self-confident minority 1903–1942*, Leiden: KITLV Press, 2007.

sources this paper too will be based on missionary sources only. But by reading these sources against the grain I aim to show how the Javanese and Sundanese enacted agency by resisting, negating and negotiating the dominant Dutch mission discourse.

Transnationalism and the Christian Mission

When studying the lives and work of these missionaries from a transnational perspective, the focus is on entanglements and connections due to the long-term encounter between various cultures. These men crossed national boundaries to spread the Word and continually moved between their own and the multiple indigenous cultures and religions during their life long careers. Steven Vertovec explains transnationalism as 'sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges among non-state actors based across national borders'.[10] Mission history studies the multiple ties and interactions that link mission organizations and people across the borders of their states. Mission history is therefore by definition transnational history. But even though the concept of transnationalism seems inherent to mission history, it still offers us a useful approach to study the interplay between the local and global sphere. It not only forces us to focus on the continuous encounters and exchanges between people from different cultural backgrounds on the global level, but also to pay close attention to the local context in order to interpret the result of these transnational processes.

The focus in transnational history is not only on the physical transgression of borders. Aside from physically crossing the motherland-colony border, the missionaries transcended many other boundaries. They crossed cultural and religious boundaries and had to act as cultural brokers to spread their convictions. Consequently, they were important actors in the transnational space where beliefs and ideas from different cultural contexts were exchanged. Contact between Dutch missionaries and Javanese Christians, especially their native assistants and other personnel, was concentrated at the mission post. The mission post usually consisted of a church, school, medical station, and the homes of the missionary and his family, of the native assistants and their families, and of resident students. Consequently, the mission post became such a transnational space where people from different cultural backgrounds interacted with each other. The transnational space can thus be a physical place, but it should

10 S. Vertovec, *Transnationalism*, London: Routledge, 2009, p. 3.

also be understood as an immaterial, symbolic space where beliefs and ideas that transcended cultural boundaries come together.[11]

The missionaries found themselves in an exceptional position, namely on the borders between the world of the colonizers and the colonised, and between their own and other religions, including other Christian denominations. This gave them a unique perspective on a wide range of processes in the colony, but it also made their proselytizing task that much harder. They constantly experienced boundaries due to power relations and inequalities. Still the relations between different actors in the transnational space should be treated in terms of interaction, instead of separateness, and it should be pointed out that even though these cross-cultural encounters produced borders, these were continuously contested and negotiated by parties on either side.[12] The missionaries' main job was to negotiate these restricting boundaries and translate their message so it would fit into a completely different context. This was not, however, an effortless process and the transnational space can therefore be best understood as a discursive arena.[13]

Christianizing Java was of course not a linear process between a dominant and recessive culture in which the people of Java silently underwent transformation. The missionary enterprise had multiple outcomes that ranged from total resistance to complete acceptance. Those who were willing to convert did not readily accept all the missionaries' teachings, every convert altered and resisted elements of what the missionaries offered them.[14] The people of Java thus actively participated in the process of embedding Christianity and especially indigenous missionary workers proved significant agents in this process. Research in different parts of the world show that missionaries were very dependent on local agents to contribute to Christianity becoming rooted in the region.[15] Reports from the NZG and NZV too show that the majority of missionaries in Java did not missionize directly; but passed this difficult task to their

11 I.R. Tyrrell, *Reforming the world: the creation of America's moral empire*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

12 M.L. Pratt, *Imperial eyes ...*, p. 7.

13 N. Fraser, "Transnationalizing the public sphere. On the legitimacy and efficacy of public opinion in a post-West-Phalian world", *Theory, culture and society*, Vol. 24 (4), July 2007, pp. 7–9. DOI: 10.1177/0263276407080090.

14 David Lindenfeld, "Indigenous encounters with Christian missionaries in China and West Africa, 1800–1920: a comparative study", *Journal of World History*, Vol. 16 (3), September 2005, pp. 327–369.

15 David Lindenfeld and Miles Richardson, *Beyond Conversion and Syncretism. Indigenous Encounters with Missionary Christianity, 1800–2000*, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011.

assistants.[16] They knew best how to find an entry into local society and connect Christianity to local beliefs and traditions. Even though indigenous assistants were always treated as subordinate by the missionaries, it is now generally accepted that they were actually the prime movers in localizing Christianity.[17]

The Dutch Christian Mission in Java

The Netherlands gained firm control over parts of the Indonesian archipelago in the early 1800's and continued expanding their empire for many decades to come. Consequently, Javanese society went through profound changes that also impacted significantly on religious matters. The official policy of the Dutch colonial state in the domain of religion was 'neutrality' in order to retain '*rust en orde*' (tranquillity and order). However, neutrality was for a long time interpreted as abstention and the Christian mission kept being forestalled because of it. Conversion was not nearly as important as maximizing the profits for the Dutch kingdom. Therefore the government deliberately discouraged proselytizing in Java, the political and economic heart of the archipelago, because it might have caused unrest which could hamper trade. It was only in the mid-nineteenth century that the Dutch colonial government abolished the general prohibition on missionary work in Java, but the relationship between the colonial state and mission organizations remained reserved.

The first missionary society that was assigned a district was the NZG in 1848. Ten years later a schism occurred in the NZG and a significant number left to found the NZV, a mission society based on the principles of the orthodox-Protestant *Réveil* (Revival).[18] The NZG held on to their liberal identity, while the NZV chose a more conservative identity.[19] Even though the differences between

16 Samuel Eliza Harthoorn, *De Evangelische Zending en Oost-Java*, Haarlem: A.G. Kruseman, 1863, p. 124.

17 Peggy Brock, Norman Etherington, Gareth Griffiths, and Jacqueline Van Gent, *Indigenous Evangelists and Questions of Authority in the British Empire 1750–1940*, Leiden: Brill, 2015.

18 Christian Revivalists strived for the revival of the conservative, Reformed theology and were not in favour of rationalism in theology. They put more emphasis on the Holy Trinity and on *Verzoeningsleer* (Classical Atonement) in their teachings. The Revivalists believed that personal experience should be stressed in the Christian faith and that Christians should live their lives consistent with Christian morals. A.J. van den Berg, *Kerkelijke strijd en zendingsorganisatie, de scheuring in het Nederlands Zendelinggenootschap rond het midden van de negentiende eeuw*, Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1997, p. 17.

19 Protestants in the Netherlands fractured into several churches during the *Doleantie* in

these two Protestant societies were quite pronounced in the Netherlands, they probably were not obvious to the Javanese and Sundanese because the districts of different mission societies were strictly separated by governments' order, in order to avoid problems and competition. The NZG was active in East Java among the Javanese and the NZV in West Java, where the Sundanese people were dominant. Both missions were small and consisted of no more than five districts in the late nineteenth century. The missionaries and their wives, who did not have an official task, were very dependent on their local assistants. The assistants were trained by the missionaries to become either teachers at the mission schools or ministers in the churches, but because of the high costs most functioned as both. The missionaries travelled around their district to visit their congregations and to guide their assistants, who were usually left the actual task of evangelizing.

The missionaries arrived in a religious landscape that was very dynamic and more complex than the often used metaphor, that described Islam as a 'thin veneer' that superficially covered the former religions, suggests.[20] Yet it is true that the older animistic, Hindu and Buddhist traditions, were still visible after Islam had become the dominant religion in the region. Many Javanese, especially those who lived in the interior, had a hybrid religious identity, which makes the Dutch metaphor understandable.[21] But the prominent idea that

1886. The *Hervormde Kerk* became the most liberal of the variants, while more theologically conservative Christians formed separate churches. These latter groups united in 1892 as the *Gereformeerde Kerk*. The NZG fit best in the tradition of the *Hervormde Kerk*, but continued its policy of accepting members from all denominational backgrounds. The members of the more conservative NZV were predominantly from the *Gereformeerde Kerk*.

20 Martin van Bruinessen, "Global and local in Indonesian Islam", *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 37 (2), January 1999, pp. 46–63.

21 In the second half of the nineteenth century a schism occurred between two diverging Javanese Islamic currents. Modern, activist Muslims challenged the 'Islamicness' of those Javanese Muslims who were now considered to be 'nominal' Muslims. These 'pious' Muslims distanced themselves from the 'heretics' by addressing themselves as the '*Wong Putihan*' or the white people, while the supposedly nominal Muslims, whom they considered to be heterodox were called the '*Wong Abangan*' or the red or brown people. For the majority, being Javanese meant living according to Javanese *adat*; the traditions and laws of their forefathers, but suddenly this lifestyle became known as *Abangan*. *Putihan* Muslims were not necessarily perceived as 'more pious' or 'better' Muslims by the majority of Javanese society. They were initially perceived as an elitist, urban group which had to some extent removed itself from the Javanese social and cultural environment. Merle Calvin Ricklefs, "The birth of the Abangan", *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde*, Vol. 162 (1), 2006, pp. 35–55.

the Javanese easily integrated new – and even conflicting – religious beliefs is not valid either and dismisses Javanese agency. The process of Islamization took centuries and when the missionaries entered the stage the majority of the Javanese people had still only partly accepted Islamic beliefs and traditions into their belief system while a substantial part had resisted Islam all together.

Nevertheless, towards the end of the nineteenth century renewed Islamization processes and reforms took place in Java and as a result the state changed its policy in the field of religion, which also affected the Christian mission. The relationship between the colonial state and the mission societies had been rather ambiguous and missionaries had often accused the state of being indifferent and counteracting the mission.[22] But when the state changed its policy towards Islam, and especially after the introduction of the Ethical Policy, the relation between the state and the mission societies improved.[23] The government started to think of the missionaries as their allies in their struggle against 'Islamic fanaticism' and they came to appreciate the civilizing aspect of the mission.

Localizing Christianity

The missionary letters show that the missionaries actually considered guiding newly converted Christians their most important task, since their assistants were usually assigned with the evangelizing task.[24] The missionaries spent most of their time teaching and visiting churches to support and advise their assistants. During these visits, they were often confronted with beliefs and practices that did not, according to them, belong in a Christian community. So they had to decide how to deal with such local expressions of faith. That decision was not just based on their own ideas and preferences, but depended largely on what the boards of the NZG and the NZV considered to be appropriate. The

22 Missionary reports show that they were regularly mistaken for government officials and that in general Christianity was considered 'the Dutch' religion, hence the religion of the oppressor. This perception of the missionaries and Christianity was of course an important factor for the result of the mission.

23 The Ethical Policy, which was introduced in 1902, aimed at bringing progress and prosperity to the peoples of the Indies.

24 The mission reports indicate that individuals who were attracted to Christianity were mostly widows, divorcées, orphans, handicapped, sick, and other poor people from the lower strata of society, who felt supported by the missionary and the congregation.

missionaries could not deviate too much from what was expected of them by their superiors, but they also wanted to ease the transition process as much as possible for the converts by permitting the continuation of Javanese traditions. Each missionary had to negotiate in order to find a compromise between the demands of all pressuring parties. Consequently, their positioning in the discourse on localizing Christianity was often highly ambiguous.

When reading the missionary reports, it seems that most missionaries prioritized their employers' wishes and dismissed nearly all local ideas and practices they encountered in their congregations as superstitious, syncretic, or heretical and tried to eradicate them. The majority claimed in their reports that they sought to ban all 'alien' elements from their Christian communities, rejected compromise, and sought to reshape local society along Dutch Christian lines. For example, converts had to change their names into a Christian name and they were expected to dress according to 'Christian values' which in practice usually meant according to Dutch fashion. They were told to celebrate festivities and commemorate their deceased in a more 'Christian manner', so the bold decoration of graves was no longer permitted.[25] A missionary of the NZV once clearly condemned this attitude of the Dutch missionaries: "The preacher of Christianity among heathens and Mohammedans is often rigid; so inflexible. Everything has to be Western: the services, the interior of the church: everything is sharply delineated and strictly dogmatic."[26] In reality however, each missionary negotiated the discourses on proper behaviour for Christians and stretched its boundaries to meet Javanese demands.

Beliefs and practices that the Dutch missionaries considered superstitious was a recurring topic in the missionary writings. They discussed practices their converts continued such as putting a pair of scissors in a baby's crib to keep away evil spirits, pregnant women who carried around a knife to ward off the *'Koentianak'* (an evil spirit who kills unborn babies), or burying a Bible next to a deceased person's mouth.[27] The missionaries agreed that such superstitious customs ought to be removed from the Christian communities, but that they proved very persistent. Carel Poensen, missionary of the NZG, mentioned in his letters that he had to keep a close eye on the newly converted people, because they still made many mistakes. He assured the board

25 E.g. S.E. Harthoorn, *Letter to the board*, Malang, 12 May 1857, 1102-1, 893, Utrechts Archief.

26 L. Tiemersma in M. Lindenborn, "De zending op West Java, antwoord op den aanval van den heer L. Tiemersma, namens het hoofdbestuur der NZV", *De Macedonier*, Vol. 32, 1914, p. 7.

27 M. Lindenborn, *Stukken van Marinus Lindenborn over de Zending in Indië onder Moslims en Animisten*, 1102-1, Utrechts Archief.

that he did everything to avoid the rise of a 'syncretic form of Christianity' and that he did not allow 'immoral' behaviour such as divorce, the use of opium, and the celebration of Muslim holidays.[28] Still he recounted many problematic incidents in his reports. For example, one incident had occurred after a newly converted Christian named Manghoen Dosiah had passed away. When Manghoen had died in 1871, Poensen's assistants and other Christians came together to mourn in his house. Suddenly they saw a piglet walking through the garden. They were surprised that the piglet did not destroy the crops and were therefore convinced it was the reincarnation of Manghoen.[29] Poensen was disappointed that old beliefs and dispositions were still present in the Christian community, even among his well-trained assistants! He often remarked that the life of a missionary was hard: "The road of bringing newly converted Christians to a higher point of morality and spiritual insight is full of difficulties and disappointments, of heartache and sorrow for the missionary."[30]

NZV missionary Albers wrote to the board about an incident with his assistant Labas, which illustrates the missionaries' general discontent with the behaviour of Javanese Christians. In 1899, a church member, Kesen Nipis, had apparently gone mad; he was singing and crying relentlessly. His Muslim neighbours were convinced he was being punished for converting. Albers sent his assistant Labas to pray for him. Labas however performed a ritual of chewing on a bunch of *sereh* and *sirih* leafs.[31] He blessed this substance with a prayer that had both Christian and Javanese elements;

> God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, these three are one. All poisons become powerless, barren earth and harmful fruit become harmless. This is the burden of the Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour, for all eternity.[32]

The patient had to swallow the substance while the assistant continuously repeated this prayer. The man got better, but the missionary was very upset that

28 C. Poensen, *Annual report 1867*, Kediri January 1868, 1102-1, 935, Utrechts Archief.

29 Carel Poensen, "Iets over Javaanse naamgeving en eigennamen", *Mededeelingen vanwege het Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap*, Vol. 14, 1870, pp. 304–317.

30 Poensen, Carel, Mattheus Aniep, Kediri, 1880, 1102-1, 935, Utrechts Archief.

31 *Sereh* is more commonly known as lemongrass. *Sirih*, or betel leaf, is commonly used in Asia as a stimulant or antiseptic.

32 C. Albers, *Letter to the board of the NZV*, Meester Cornelis, 10 April 1899, 1102-1, 1881, Utrechts Archief.

one of his assistants had used such an 'un-Christian ritual' to cure the man.[33] Yet Labas considered the ritual perfectly acceptable Christian behaviour, since the prayer clearly consisted of Christian elements.[34] Conflicts like these were common in the transnational space. It shows that the power to define what was properly Christian was not singlehandedly owned by the missionaries and that the newly converted openly negotiated with the missionaries. The Javanese church members tried to find a path of continuity in the midst of their new creed and constantly appropriated missionary Christianity.

Pre-Christian Javanese ideas and rituals remained present in the Christian communities, which was usually not considered problematic in the eyes of the Javanese Christians. Many Javanese had an identity based on hybrid religious notions and this rarely caused conflict.[35] It was not uncommon that a devout Muslim or Christian would turn to previous religious traditions in certain circumstances, such as illness or other misfortune. Such circumstances could require additional prayers or rituals from one's traditional religion, especially if their new religion did not really offer a strong alternative. To be a Christian and to perform rituals from the previous religious tradition was not considered fraud or cheating; both religions could be professed alternately or simultaneously. The Dutch missionaries, however, insisted on an exclusive religious identity and considered dual affiliation inconsistent and objectionable.

When the missionaries encountered beliefs and practices in their districts that were vastly different from what they were used to in the Netherlands they first tried to abandon these. However, punishing converts for 'unchristian' behaviour was not easy since the missionaries were reluctant to excommunicate members. Their nascent congregations were already very small and it might lead to other members leaving church. Instead they opted for sanctions like postponing one's baptism, reducing one's financial support or excluding members from the Lord's Supper for a few months. These measures however did not stop the Javanese and Sundanese from continuing beliefs and rituals that were of great significance to them. Therefore the missionaries had to

33 C. Albers, *Letter to the board of the NZV*, Meester Cornelis, 10 April 1899, 1102-1, 1881, Utrechts Archief.

34 C. Albers, *Letter to the board of the NZV*, Meester Cornelis, 10 April 1899, 1102-1, 1881, Utrechts Archief.

35 I use the term hybrid for analysing phenomena in which elements, meanings, or forms are shared, combined or mixed. I avoid the term 'syncretism' which was commonly used by the missionaries in order to distance myself from the pejorative way in which they used this term.

accept that they were not the most important agents in the missionary enterprise but that the people of Java played a decisive role in localizing Christianity from the very beginning.

As a consequence the missionaries had to find ways to justify the continuation of beliefs and rituals that proved too hard to eradicate. They invented various considerations and used different criteria to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable belief and behaviour. The Dutch mission discourse suggested that the criteria to decide whether a specific practice or idea could be tolerated or had to be abolished was to determine whether the practice was 'cultural', and therefore more or less harmless, or 'religious' in origin.[36] The missionaries' decision required active formation and implementation of these conceptual categories and each missionary conveniently redefined these categories in order to justify the decisions he had made in the field.[37] Such discursive strategies explain the recurrent ambiguities in their writings. The classification of certain cultural phenomena as 'religious' and its separation from a sphere known as 'culture' was even less obvious to non-Europeans, who had a completely different cultural background. The choices the missionaries made concerning which practices were still allowed and which were not were most likely considered arbitrary by many new Christians. In the following I will discuss Javanese customs that were most often subject to debate in the young congregations in order to show the limits of missionary power and to show how each of the missionaries negotiated the discursive border between 'culture' and 'religion' in their attempt to justify their nonconformist approach.

Gamelan and Wayang

Gamelan refers to the instruments in a musical ensemble which is typical for the islands of Java and Bali. For most Javanese, *gamelan* is an integral part of their culture and has strong political and religious roots. *Gamelan* plays an important part in sustaining traditional life because certain *gamelans* are associated with specific courtly and religious rituals. A *gamelan* orchestra often accompanies performances of *wayang*. *Wayang kulit*, shadow puppet theatre, is the best known of the different types of Indonesian *wayang*. The carvings and puppets were often considered to be objects that ancestral spirits can temporarily inhabit. *Wayang* was also a significant political instrument during

36 W. Keane, *Christian moderns ...*, p. 85.

37 W. Keane, *Christian moderns ...*, p. 85.

colonial times; even the performance alone could be considered a political act to reaffirm Java's glorious past.

The missionaries quickly learned that changing the character of *gamelan* and *wayang* proved nearly impossible. In 1858, missionary Samuel Harthoorn and his assistants were in disagreement about *gamelan* orchestras and *wayang* plays in Christian communities. Harthoorn sought to negotiate adjustment of aspects of the ritual which he found difficult to reconcile with his understanding of Christianity. However, he was forced to realize that it would be difficult to fully ban these traditions from the Christian communities since they were so deeply rooted in Javanese identity. Therefore he decided to downplay the religious elements in *gamelan* and *wayang* and focus on the cultural aspects of these customs to defend his approach. He explained to the board of the NZG that he could not understand why other missionaries forbade Javanese songs, *gamelan*, and poetry, while so many Dutch Christians were addicted to visiting cafés, balls and concerts.[38] Still he demanded that *gamelan* performances should be without dancing girls present and that *wayang* should not be used for showing 'immoral stories'. Furthermore, he made clear that he did not encourage *gamelan* and *wayang* in his congregation because it could too easily lead people to temptation.[39]

Christians in the NZV district Meester Cornelis never went to a *wayang* or *gamelan* performance according to their missionary Christiaan Albers. He boasted: "I have never bothered my Christians with commandments and prohibitions. I have never forbid them to go to the *wayang*, take part in *tandok* (dance) parties, or attend Muslim offerings etc. etc. I do not remember a case in which a Christian has attended one of these occasions. Their conscience forbids it."[40] He continued: "… soon one sees that these Christians are not at peace with some things, things they did not consider wrong when they were still Muslim. Their conscience immediately protests against joining *wayang* shows, against participating in the local dances, etc."[41] Whether or not Albers was telling the truth is difficult to know and it's also quite possible that he was kept in the dark about the exact whereabouts of his community.

38 H. Smeding, 'Over een reis aan Kediri en Madioen door Harthoorn en Smeding', in: *Mededeelingen vanwege het Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap*, Vol. 7, 1861, pp. 245–286.

39 S.E. Harthoorn, *Diary on August and September 1858*, Malang, 1858, 1102-1, 1856, Utrechts Archief.

40 C. Albers, *Letter to the board of the NZV*, Bidana Tjina, 10 June 1886, 1102-1, 1881, Utrechts Archief.

41 C. Albers, *Letter to the board of the NZV*, Bidana Tjina, 10 June 1886, 1102-1, 1881, Utrechts Archief.

The fact that a *wayang* show was commonly preceded by a spiritual ceremony in which a sacrifice to the gods was made, was usually left out of the missionaries' arguments. Only Carel Poensen explicitly mentioned this aspect, but surprisingly enough in his motivation for allowing *wayang*. In line with the prevailing discourse, he distinguished between culture and religion and only permitted the 'cultural elements'. He took an ambiguous position in the discourse and reluctantly allowed the Christians in his district to enjoy *gamelan* music and *wayang* plays on the one condition that the *dalang* (puppeteer) would not make an offering to present spirits beforehand.[42] He encouraged Christians to pay the *dalang* with money, instead of paying him with food that could be used for an offering.[43] Nevertheless, in a letter of a later date Poensen argues that both practices should be prohibited as soon as Christianity had grown stronger in the region, which clearly demonstrates his pragmatic standpoint in this matter.[44]

Slametan

A *slametan* or *sedekah* is considered the core ritual in Javanese religion. It is a communal feast to strengthen the community ties and to offer food to the gods to ask for peace and prosperity. A *slametan* could be organised for several reasons such as a harvest, birth, marriage, death, or circumcision. The host starts the ritual by praying and explaining his motive to his guests and then a local priest chants prayers. After this, everyone receives a share of the food. It is believed that the essence of the food is consumed by the spirits who are present and that only the physical part is left for the guests.[45] Although NZV missionary Albers was quite conservative with respect to adapting Christianity to the Javanese context, he was forced to act as a liberal on this point. He wrote about his Christmas service in 1882: "I used to treat pastries while singing, like we are used to present refreshments. This time we decided to leave this habit. We have to be more and more traditional, also when it comes to our transferred

42 C. Poensen, "Eenige vragen over de zending op Java, beantwoord door Carel Poensen", *Mededeelingen vanwege het Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap*, Vol. 12, 1868, pp. 32–60.

43 C. Poensen, "De Wajang", *Mededeelingen vanwege het Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap*, Vol. 16, 1872, pp. 59–115, 204–222, 233–280.

44 C. Poensen, *Letter to the board of the NZG*, Kediri, 5 March 1875, 1102-1, 934, Utrechts Archief.

45 A.H. Santoso, *Protestant Christianity in the Indonesian context; colonial missions, independent churches and indigenous faith*, unpublished thesis, Wheaton, 2006, pp. 85–86.

holidays. Therefore, we ended with a *sedekah* (*slametan*, M.K.)."[46] Albers permitted the Javanese Christians to close celebratory services with a *slametan* from then on, even though he labelled it in other letters as an Islamic ritual that needed to be eradicated.[47] He negotiated aspects of the ritual and permitted his community to continue the tradition of celebrating with a *slametan* on the condition that they changed all prayers into Christian prayers. Yet he explicitly forbade his community to attend *slametans* that were organized by non-Christians. Missionaries Harthoorn and Poensen had a similar approach to the *slametan*. However, their correspondence shows that it proved difficult to enforce this rule since many Christian Javanese refused to stay away from traditional *slametans*.

The salient argument in the mission discourse for permitting the continuation of a certain practice was whether the practice was 'cultural' instead of 'religious' in origin. At first it seems that the missionaries tried to meet the expectations of their superiors by separating 'cultural' from 'religious' aspects: they required that all Muslim prayers would be dropped. But even without the prayers the essence of the ritual is still clearly religious, so the missionaries' usual argument proved insufficient. Yet despite its religious character all Dutch missionaries were forced to tolerate this non-negotiable ritual. So how did they defend their choice to do so? They found justification in the fact that it was not a Muslim ritual in origin. When reading the missionaries' arguments more closely it becomes clear that a practice could be tolerated as long as it clearly was *not* rooted in Islam – even if it had its roots in a different religious system, like animism, Buddhism or Hinduism. So the missionaries defended their decision to allow *slametans* by explaining that it was not purely a *Muslim* ritual in the eyes of the Javanese.[48] This, and the condition set by all missionaries that the accompanying prayers had to be Christianized, indicate that in practice the distinction was not actually made between religion and culture, as the discourse initially suggested, but between Islamic and non-Islamic practices.

The missionaries found a solution in presenting Javanese religious traditions as cultural traditions and opposing these to Islam. They stretched the boundary of the category 'culture' to include rituals with roots in religions other than Islam. Possibly, the missionaries did not consider a ritual which

46 C. Albers, *Letter to the board of the NZV*, Cianjur, 4 January 1882, 1102-1, 1879, Utrechts Archief.

47 C. Albers, *Annual report on 1887*, Bidana Tjina, 1 January 1888, 1102-1, 1879, Utrechts Archief.

48 F. van Lith, *Kjahi Sadrach, eene les voor ons uit de Protestantse zending van midden Java*, unpublished manuscript, Archives of the Jesuit Province of Indonesia, Semarang.

had its roots in a 'primitive' religion as much as a threat in contrast to a ritual which was linked to orthodox Islam. The missionaries did not value the pre-Islamic Javanese religious traditions highly; animistic religions, Hinduism and Buddhism were considered primitive and underdeveloped. Expressions of these traditions were often dismissed as superstition which would disappear once the people became more familiar with more developed belief systems, such as Islam or Christianity.[49] Another reason for the missionaries' tolerance in respect to pre-Islamic religious traditions is that those traditions had penetrated Javanese society more thoroughly than Islam and therefore might be even more difficult to fight. Perhaps the missionaries' choices were more pragmatism than anything else.

Circumcision

In general, circumcision was considered to be an Islamic tradition. Most missionaries therefore forbade their community members to circumcise their sons, although they all confessed that Christians occasionally still performed the procedure in secret.[50] Missionary Harthoorn of the NZG formed the exception to the rule and eventually decided to tolerate the practice in his district. Since this went beyond the borders of what the Dutch mission discourse permitted, he had to come up with a way to justify his choice by negotiating its boundaries.

In 1858, a Christian boy in the Malang district was circumcised with permission from missionary Harthoorn. He permitted it because the parents made clear that they would go ahead with it in any case since their son had been bullied so severely for being a *kafir* (unbeliever).[51] Harthoorn's only other option was to stand firm and excommunicate the family, which would threaten the survival of the already small congregation. Harthoorn explained his choice with arguments from the dominant discourse; he argued that the practice was not necessarily religious and could also be considered cultural. He admitted that because the ritual was ancient and there used to be no distinction between culture and religion, all cultural phenomena, including circumcision, used to have some religious symbolism.[52] Yet, he was convinced the practice could be con-

49 David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996.

50 E.g. C. Poensen, "De zending in Kediri en Madioen", *Mededeelingen vanwege het Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap*, Vol. 31, 1887.

51 S.E. Harthoorn, *Diary on 22 August 1858*, Malang, 1857, 1102-1, 893, Utrechts Archief.

52 S.E. Harthoorn, *Diary on 22 August 1858*, Malang, 1857, 1102-1, 893, Utrechts Archief.

tinued after it was stripped of its religious significance.[53] Harthoorn presented it as a medical operation that was advisable in tropical areas and compared it to the cowpox vaccine. Although he had to admit that most Javanese considered it a religious ritual which confirmed their Muslim identity, he argued that it was only a matter of time until they would let go of this idea.

By downplaying the religious aspects of the ritual, Harthoorn legitimized his choice for permitting it. But above all, he too based his decision on the argument that circumcision was not a Muslim ritual since it is not explicitly mentioned in the *Qur'an*.[54] He assured the board that no Islamic priest would be present to chant Arabic prayers during the procedure to minimize the Islamic character of the procedure. Similar to the discussion about the *slametan*, the question whether the practice was Islamic or non-Islamic proved decisive in deciding whether to consent to it or not. Nevertheless, when the other missionaries and the board of the NZG found out that Harthoorn had consented to a circumcision they reacted furiously. They argued that circumcision was commonly perceived as a Muslim ritual that confirms one's Muslim identity and could therefore never be allowed in a Christian community. A few supporters of the mission demanded that the boy and his parents would be exiled from church and immediately stopped their financial aid to Harthoorn. But the NZG board did not want to lose the family either and only asked that the family would be excluded from the Lord's Supper for a while.[55]

The Institution of Marriage

The institution of marriage proved to be a problem for the Christian missionaries. Especially since they not only had to find a compromise between the Dutch discourse on a Christian marriage and local customs, but they also had to take government law into account. They realised that Javanese marriage practices differed significantly from Western or Christian marriage practices. Samuel Harthoorn even suggested that there were no 'true' marriages in Java, he described them as arrangements of "temporary selfish cohabitation"; "people are together to enjoy the other, not to live for each other, or console or support the other".[56] The missionaries were unsure how to deal with matters

53 C.W. Nortier, *Het leven van Samuel Eliza Harthoorn, zendeling op Oost Java, 1854–1863*, unpublished manuscript, 1944–1945, 1102-1, 893, Utrechts Archief.

54 S.E. Harthoorn, *Diary on 22 August 1858*, Malang, 1857, 1102-1, 893, Utrechts Archief.

55 S.E. Harthoorn, *Diary on 22 August 1858*, Malang, 1857, 1102-1, 893, Utrechts Archief.

56 S.E. Harthoorn, "Iets over den Javaanschen mohammedanen en den Javaanschen christe-

like arranged marriages, child marriages, divorce, interracial and interreligious marriages, and negotiated the discourses of the three parties involved in the transnational sphere in various ways.

Some missionaries believed the Christian laws concerning matrimony needed to be loosened to adapt to the Javanese context, at least in the initial phase of the mission. For example, Carel Poensen reasoned that since divorces could not be avoided in this early stage of the Christian mission, the church might as well benefit from it. He decided to charge five guilders for the service in his district.[57] Harthoorn was also pragmatic in his thinking about marriage in a Christian Javanese context. For example, he agreed to marry two baptized Christians, even though he was aware that they had already lived together 'in sin'.[58] As a concession to his employers, he decided not to marry them in church, but at their house and he forbade bridal wear and a procession.[59] He explained to the board that these young Christians did not yet understand the concept of a Christian marriage and therefore needed to be educated within the church instead of being banished from it.

According to missionary writings, Dutch colonial law demanded that a *penghulu*, a Muslim priest, conducted the marriage ceremony. Moreover, according to colonial law the groom also had to pronounce the Islamic creed, the *Shahada*, in order to complete the ceremony. *Shari'a*, however, does not demand that people are married by an *imam* or *penghulu* or that they pronounce the *Shahada* in order to legalize the bond. The missionaries often complained that the Dutch government enhanced the Islamization process in the region through these kinds of new regulations. This left the Christian Javanese with only two options; not to get married or to deny their Christian faith by pronouncing the *Shahada*. Missionary Poensen tried to circumvent this problem and decided that Christians in his district would have a ceremony in church only. He admitted that his community was not aware that such marriages were not legal according to Dutch colonial law, but he preferred them not finding out, since that would only create problems.[60]

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nen", *Mededeelingen vanwege het Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap*, Vol. 1, 1857, pp. 183–213.

57 C. Poensen, "De zending in Kediri en Madioen", *Mededeelingen vanwege het Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap*, Vol. 31, 1887.

58 Nortier, *Het leven van Samuel Eliza Harthoorn*.

59 S.E. Harthoorn, *Diary on May and June 1857*, Malang, 1857, 1102-1, 893, Utrechts Archief.

60 C. Poensen, "De zending in Kediri en Madioen en staat", *Mededeelingen vanwege het Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap*, Vol. 30, 1886.

Concluding Remarks

The Dutch mission organizations demanded results, both quantitative and qualitative. The personal writings of the missionaries show that those mission districts that did not meet expectations risked being shut down. Every missionary thus felt a continuous pressure to produce acceptable numbers. However, they were not supposed to accept just anyone into church. Only genuine devotees who were willing to part with their former way of life should be accepted. The boards of the missionary societies expected the Javanese converts to give up their former lifestyle after conversion, since after all the baptism symbolised rebirth. But the missionaries met a lot of resistance to the rules they tried to impose. Many who converted to Christianity were not willing to radically alter their lifestyle and to separate themselves completely from the Muslim community. The missionaries thus had to accept that their congregation continued certain practices and integrated Christian beliefs with pre-existing traditions. This led to fierce discussions with their employers, who had no understanding of the day-to-day difficulties the missionaries had to deal with.

This paper showed that faith alone was not enough to be considered a 'good Christian' by the Dutch. The missionaries expected more of their converts despite the Protestant emphasis on inner conviction. The Javanese converts were expected to act according to what the missionaries considered 'proper Christian behaviour'. The mission letters indicate that the most challenging aspect of being a missionary was actually not persuading people to convert, but guiding young converts on their way of becoming 'true' or 'proper' Christians in the Dutch sense. The missionary found himself in a difficult position where he had to accommodate both the wishes of his employer and of the local population. While some missionaries chose to handle local expressions of Christianity as incidents that could be abolished, others theorized extensively about adaptation. They negotiated with their community in order to connect ideas and practices from their own cultural context to those from the Javanese context and form a localized version of Christianity. The missionaries' constant negotiations with these opposing discourses in the transnational space led to decisions and lines of argumentations that often appear to be ambiguous.

The missionaries had to find a way to legitimize their unorthodox policies and their correspondence showed that most missionaries did this by constructing a division between 'culture' and 'religion'. In line with the dominant discourse, they aimed at an accommodation with local culture and dismissed all non-Christian religious elements. This construction was applied differently by each missionary, because there was no unanimity about which belief or ritual belonged in which category. When confronted with a non-negotiable practice

that had clear religious features, the missionaries had to use a different discursive strategy to justify their questionable decisions. Instead they turned to the argument that beliefs and practices could be permitted as long as they could not be linked to Islam. For instance, the *slametan*, a practice that undoubtedly had severe religious significance, was allowed by all three on the assumption that it was not reminiscent of Islam. Furthermore, the argument that Samuel Harthoorn employed to permit circumcision was also that it was not necessarily perceived as a Muslim ritual in the Indies. He argued that circumcision could be tolerated in Christian communities after it was deprived of its Islamic significance. Carel Poensen explained why women wore a veil in his church and sat separately from men by pointing out that those were not Islamic customs *per se*.

This paper showed how three Dutch missionaries dealt in different ways with indigenous marriage traditions and controversial practices such as *gamelan*, *wayang, slametan*, and circumcision. The conflicts surrounding these practices show that the missionaries' power to impose their version of Christianity was rather limited. They had to accept that they were not the most important agents, but that the people of Java played a decisive role in localizing Christianity from the very beginning. The missionaries were pressed to accept the embedding of their teachings, but this didn't come naturally. Missionary Christiaan Albers summarized their dilemma with the words: "They want to be Christian in their own way, but that is impossible of course."[61]

61 C. Albers, *Letter to the board of the NZV*, Bidana Tjina, 1 January 1888, 1102-1, 1880, Utrechts Archief.