

# The Javanese Rite of *Slametan*

## A Comparison with the Eucharistic Celebration

by Rafael Isharianto, C.M.

*Province of Indonesia*

The purpose of this reflection is to compare the dimensions of the Eucharistic celebration with the Javanese rite of '*slametan*.' Since our reflection is culturally particular, it seems quite normal that we begin this reflection by taking the Javanese culture into consideration. We decided to use this approach because the Javanese culture has much effect on the Indonesian personality and identity.

### **The Javanese View of the Universe**

According to the world picture in the Javanese culture, there is a universal cosmos with a harmonious hierarchical and collective order. The cosmos includes the invisible world and nature, as well as the visible world and society. All have certain and appropriate places. Therefore, society is ordered hierarchically and collectively and the stratification is harmonious: there is a hierarchy of the powerful (*wong gedhé*) and there is also a collective life of the powerless (*wong cilik*).

This hierarchy is believed to be magical and static. It can help solidify society. Therefore, the right attitude of man in the cosmos is that of acceptance (*nrimá*). In society, everyone has his place and obligation. That is why, as long as a man puts his own personal interests above all, he will never be able to adapt himself to the harmony as a cosmic power. It is comprehensible because fulfilling this cosmic duty supposes that he is free from egoism.

To maintain the sense of harmony, the Javanese use, as a system of pedagogy, the education of identity and personality. It is implemented through the internalisation of sensitivity (*râsâ*). This education is destined to identify one's right place and role and adapt oneself to the existing harmony. This refined attitude (*halus*) will bring about spiritual happiness and peace. On the other hand, a rude attitude (*kasar*), disturbs the harmony. Such an attitude will eventually be in vain and lead to failure.

## **Slametan**

The Javanese rite, which is meant to maintain the harmony, is called *slametan*. C. Geertz describes this rite as a simple and formal ceremony (J.B. Banawiratma, 1986: 49). We do not find in it a rite, which is dramatic. On the other hand, the rite is almost mythic. One element in the rite is the offering in the form of food. This offering has a socio-religious dimension because the neighbors, relatives and friends participate in the gathering. In general, as the terminology indicates, the goal of *slametan* is to achieve inner peace of mind ("*slamet*").

Niels Mulder (1996: 28) observes that people hold *slametan* on every occasion, including when crises and disorder appear. To nurture a peaceful harmony, this rite is also held to celebrate regular social moments. People also organize *slametan* at the moment when something bad is bothering prosperity and equilibrium. All participants have the same ritual status. Everybody makes the same contribution to the creation of the spiritual dimension of the ceremony. Accordingly, the function of *slametan* is to show that society is in harmony. The harmony itself becomes the condition, without which the Divine will never grant their prayers, neither will the spirit of their ancestors, nor the other cosmic spirits.

*Slametan* has also another function; namely, to show the willingness to receive protection against dangers in a chaotic world. The participants do not intend to have a better life neither at the present moment nor in the future. Their only aspiration is to maintain harmony and to avoid dangers in such a way that they may not happen. We should not forget here that man plays an active role in maintaining the order and its dynamism.

## **Dimensions of the Eucharist**

According to Article 47 of Vatican II's Constitution, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, there are five dimensions of the Eucharist. First of all, it is a sacrifice. We celebrate Jesus who has given up himself. In the Last Supper, where the moment of betrayal reigned, he was still able to underline the truth that his death was a sacrifice.

The Eucharist has also a memorial dimension. Jesus "*broke the bread and said: 'This is my body which is given up for you. Do this in memory of me.'*" Celebrating the Eucharist, the Church commemorates the Paschal Mysteries of Christ. Yet, the commemoration does not mean only the memory of the events in the past. The commemoration underlines the proclamation of the wonderful work of God because he is still accomplishing his promises of salvation up to now. By this commemoration, these events become, in a certain

sense, present and actual. Moreover, the sacrament of the Eucharist would like also to draw the attention of the faithful to the complete accomplishment of salvation in the future. In this context, the Eucharist becomes “a pledge for future glory.”

St. Paul writes that the participation in the Lord’s Supper means the communion with the Lord as well. By this sacrament, the members of the Church unite themselves to Christ and form one body (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). The Eucharist is thus a sign of unity. Nobody shall be excluded from the paschal banquet, since God wishes all men to be saved, without any exception.

### **Slametan in the Eucharistic Perspective**

We can now try to articulate some dimensions of the Javanese rite. For this reason, we use the points manifested in Article 47 of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. In the *slametan* rite, all the participants sit around one table on which the offering lies. The offering contains yellow rice, chicken, vegetables, and other food. Just like all other religious systems, this Javanese rite is in fact a religious meal. The memorial aspect of the Javanese rite is quite obvious. People hold this religious rite on several occasions such as the funeral, the prayer meeting after someone’s death. They commemorate the person(s) for whom they get together for the rite.

The rite of *slametan* contains a communal dimension. All relatives and neighbors who live nearby are invited to participate. The ritual chief (*modin*) says the benediction over the offering and then all the participants eat just a little of the offering. They can go home bringing the rest of the offering for their families. The distribution of the offering to the other members of the participants’ families underlines the communal aspect of the Javanese rite. It is a gesture which expresses the harmony among all the members of the society. In this communal harmony, no one should be excluded. The prayer said by the *modin* is believed to be able to invite the *cosmic spirits* to participate in the rite. According to this religious conviction, the Javanese *slametan* intends to make people live in harmony with each other as well as with the cosmic spirits.

When the Javanese organize the *slametan* rite, in connection with some important moments of life (birth, harvest, circumcision, marriage, professional promotion, etc.), this religious meal can be seen as a thanksgiving celebration. The Javanese perceive these things as a gift coming from the Divine.

### Some Reflections

After a very general comparison between the *slametan* and the Eucharist, we can conclude that the Last Supper of Jesus affirms the values that already existed in the Javanese rite. It is in this context that the Eucharistic liturgy expresses the meaning of the Javanese *berkah*: “grace,” “gifts.” Everything is grace. At the same time the socio-religious rite of *slametan* enables the Christian Javanese to see the relation between their cultural rite and the Eucharistic celebration. Hence, the Javanese rite of *slametan* can be regarded as fertile soil for the celebration of the cosmic Eucharist.

Meanwhile we observe some divergences between the Eucharist and *slametan*. We mention here only two. While the Eucharistic celebration emphasizes its anticipation of the paschal banquet in the future, the latter does not have any orientation toward the future. In short, the Javanese rite does not consider the time-orientation as an essential aspect in the celebration. The focal element is protection against dangers, which menace the community as a whole. Besides, we do not find the paschal dimension in the Javanese *slametan*. Harmony becomes an important point in this rite. We can say that the “*do ut des*” pattern lies behind the rite. But this pattern should be understood in its positive sense.