
UNIT 8 RITUAL-II : A CASE STUDY FROM SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Structure

- 8.0 Objectives
- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 The Setting
 - 8.2.1 Java's History—A Summary
 - 8.2.2 Society in Modjokuto
 - 8.2.3 Cultural Types in Java
- 8.3 'Slametan'—A Core Ritual in Javanese Religion
 - 8.3.1 The 'Slametan' Pattern
 - 8.3.2 The Meaning of 'Slametan'
- 8.4 'Slametan'—Two Examples
 - 8.4.1 The 'Tingkeban'
 - 8.4.2 Marriage—'Kepanggihhan'
- 8.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 8.6 Key Words
- 8.7 Further Readings
- 8.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

8.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- briefly describe Javanese history, society and culture
- explain the meaning and significance of the core Javanese ritual called 'Slametan' with the help of two examples.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 7 you learnt something about the ritual system of a simple, tribal society in Africa. In this unit, the focus shifts to a complex society characterised by immense diversity in occupation, economic status, cultural and social patterns in South-East Asia. We shall look at some aspects of rituals in Java whose religion has been studied in detail by Clifford Geertz in his monograph entitled 'The Religion of Java'. This monograph first published in 1960 was the first of a series of monographs dealing with various aspects of contemporary Javanese life. Geertz did his fieldwork in a town in east-central Java which he called 'Modjokuto'. (It is quite common for sociologists and anthropologists to give fictional names to the people and places they study for reasons of privacy) Geertz's monograph deals with Javanese religion, not just ritual, but for the purpose of this unit, we shall concentrate selectively on his description and analysis of ritual.

We will begin the unit by giving you a brief outline of the history of Java. We will then move on to describe the economic and social setting of Modjokuto, as given by Geertz, and describe the three major cultural complexes described by him. This will be the first section. The second section will describe 'slametan' or the communal feast, which Geertz regards as the core ritual in Javanese religious life. Some types of 'slametans' will be described in the third and final section.

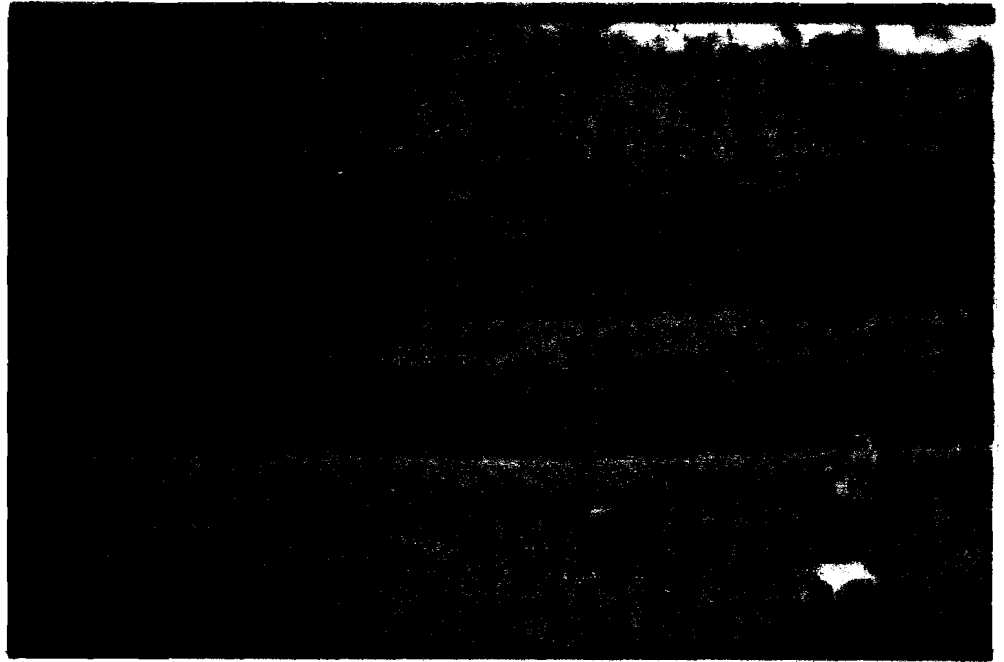
8.2 THE SETTING

Human habitation in Java dates back to pre-historic times. Indeed, the remains of

primitive humans ('Pithecanthropus rectus' or 'Java man') were found here in 1891. Let us briefly review the history of this ancient civilisation.

8.2.1 Java's History—A Summary

The island of Java forms part of the nation-state of Indonesia. It is regarded as the cultural, economic and political nerve centre of Indonesia. Indeed, Indonesia's capital, Djakarta, is Java's largest city. In the 5th century A.D., Hindus entered and settled in eastern and central Java. The Hindu-Javanese state of Majcpahit (found in 1293) marked the peak of Javanese history. In the 13th century, Islam was introduced and the Muslim state of Mataram was founded. Contemporary Javanese culture bears the stamp of both, Hinduism and Islam. 90% of Java's population is Muslim. 1596 saw the arrival of Dutch traders in the form of the Dutch East India Company which gradually absorbed the remnants of the Javanese empire. The company was liquidated in 1798 and Java came under direct Dutch rule, which lasted until 1949, when Indonesia became a sovereign country. It became a republic in 1950 under the leadership of Sukarno. Let us now focus upon the town in east-central Java where Geertz did his fieldwork.



Indonesian men and woman working together in their rice fields

8.2.2 Society in Modjokuto

Modjokuto is the commercial, educational and administrative centre for 18 surrounding villages. It had a population of about 20,000 of which the bulk was Javanese, with a sprinkling of Chinese, Arabian and Indian elements. Surrounded by thousands of rice-fields, Modjokuto's economy was a blend of agriculture and trade. The core of native commercial life was the market where daily, hundreds of Javanese men and women bargained and struggled to earn a living, trading all manner of goods, from textiles to fish to medicines and dry goods for a profit. In Geertz's words, "For the Modjokuto Javanese, whether buyer or seller, the market is the very model of commercial life, the source of nearly all his ideas of the possible and proper in economic behaviour." (p.3). Apart from agricultural and trading activities, white-collar office work is the third major occupational type. White collar workers include teachers and government officials, who form the intellectual and social elite of

Modjokuto. As Geertz says, they are the "...inheritors of a political tradition in which the ability to read and write was confined to a hereditary court class born to rule and venerated for doing so." (p.3). There exists a general attitude of respect and subservience of the uneducated towards the educated.

Geertz identified three main social-structural nuclei in Java, namely, the village, the market and the government bureaucracy. Each of these has a corresponding world outlook in terms of their religious beliefs and political ideologies. In short, they constitute three distinct cultural types. Let us see what these are.

8.2.3 Cultural Types in Java

The three cultural types each associated with its distinct social-structural nuclei are as follows:

- i) 'Abangan' tradition—associated with the village. Javanese villages are originally inhabited by people professing animistic beliefs. With the arrival of the Hindus, and later the Muslims, a syncretic tradition combining animistic, Hinduistic and Islamic elements arose. Geertz describes it as "...the island's true folk tradition, the basic substratum of its civilisation..." (p.5).
- ii) 'Santri' tradition—associated with the market. The 'Santri' tradition is associated with a more puristic version of Islam. It consists of careful and regular performance of the major Islamic rituals, namely, the daily prayers, the Fast and the Pilgrimage to Mecca. A whole complex of social, charitable and political Islamic organisations form an important part of this tradition.
- iii) 'Priajati' tradition—associated with the white-collar elite. The white collar elite descendents of the hereditary aristocracy (which was the only group with access to education) whose roots lie in the pre-colonial Hindu-Javanese courts. The Priajati tradition thus stresses Hinduistic and Buddhist elements. It is marked by a complex art of dance, drama, poetry and mysticism. However, colonialism and the Western influence has lead to this group becoming highly secularised, westernised and anti-traditional. Yet, the elite priajati life-style still remains a model for the entire society.

In a nutshell, then, the Abangan tradition, broadly related to the peasant element of the population, stresses an overall Javanese syncretism. the Santri tradition related to the trading section is associated with more puritanical Islam and the Priajati tradition of the elite group stresses Hinduistic and mystical elements. Geertz points out that this diversity does not suggest that there is no underlying religious unity in Java. His stated intention is "...to bring home the reality of the complexity, depth, and richness of their religious life" (p.7).

In this unit, we shall mainly describe rituals as performed by the Abangan section. But before we do so, why not check your progress?

'Check Your Progress 1

- i) Name the various belief-systems that have contributed to Javanese folk religion. Answer in about five lines.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....
ii) What are the major elements of the 'Prijaji' tradition? Answer in about five lines.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

iii) What effect did colonialism have on the Javanese elite? Answer in about five lines.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

8.3 'SLAMETAN'—A CORE RITUAL IN JAVANESE RELIGION

The Slametan or communal feast lies at the heart of the whole Javanese religious system. The communal feast, Geertz points out, is probably the most common religious ritual in the world. The Slametan, in Greetz's words, "...symbolises the mystic and social unity of those participating in it. Friends, neighbours, 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" (p.11).

Amongst those belonging to the Abangan tradition, the Slametan still retains much of its original force and attraction, although its efficacy is no longer so great amongst the urban dwellers. Slametans can be given in response to any important occasion, be it a rite of passage (birth, circumcision, marriage, death) or affliction (illness, bad dreams, witchcraft etc.) or an occasion like shifting residence or starting a business. The emphasis, naturally, differs in each case. Let us now describe the usual pattern of the Slametan.

8.3.1 The 'Slametan' Pattern

Slametans are invariably held in the evenings, just after sunset and the completion of evening prayers. An auspicious day is chosen. During the day, the women of the household prepare food, sometimes taking help from women of the wider kin group. The ceremony is an all-male affair, women are expected to stay in the kitchen. The men invited are all close neighbours. The host's messenger (usually his son) calls them only 5-10 minutes before the actual ceremony. They must drop whatever they are doing and go to the host's home. Of course, it is usually a known fact that a slametan is going to be held, and the men are prepared for the invitation. At the host's house, the invitees sit in a circle, around the dishes of food that have already been placed in the centre of the floor.

The host opens the ceremony with an extremely formal speech. He expresses gratitude for the neighbours' presence and hopes that the benefits of the ceremony

may be shared by all. He then gives the reason for the ceremony (e.g. his daughter's marriage, his wife's pregnancy etc.). He gives the general reason for the rite, namely, to secure for himself, his family and his guests the state of 'Slamet'! **This means a state of physical and mental calm and equilibrium.** To achieve this stage, he appeals to the spirits of the village. Finally, he apologises for any errors he may have made in his speech, and for the inadequacy of the food he is providing to his guests. This formal speech is known as the 'udjub'.

At the end of his speech, the host requests one of his guests to give the Arabic chant prayer. On special occasions, the 'modin' or religious specialist may be invited to do so. When the chanting ends, the serving of the food begins. Each guest receives a cup of tea and a banana-leaf dish in which all the different types of food are served. The host does not eat. Each variety of food symbolises something special, as we shall see later in the unit. The host requests his guests to eat. They eat quietly (talking while eating is believed to bring bad luck) and quickly. After eating a few mouthfuls, they stop and ask the host for permission to leave. They go home quietly and eat the remaining food in the privacy of their homes with their families. Such community feasts and ritual are very much part of India's village traditions. Sociologists have discovered that such feasts are context-specific, addressing themselves to particular situations. The Slametan is over. What is the social significance of this ritual? Let us read Geertz's analysis of the meaning of Slametan, based on the views of his Javanese informers.

8.3.2 The Meaning of 'Slametan'

Why do the Javanese hold Slametans? A bricklayer told Geertz, "When you give a Slametan, nobody is any different from anyone else and so they do not want to split up. Also a slametan protects you against the spirits, so they will not upset you". (p.11). The wish for state of 'Slamet' earlier mentioned is defined by the Javanese as "gak ana apa-apa" which means "nothing is going to happen to anyone". The aroma of foods at the Slametan is considered as food for the spirits in order to pacify them, so that they do not trouble the living. It is important to note that spirits are seen as disturbing or disrupting to human and social activity. The Slametan represents what Geertz describes as "...a reassertion and reinforcement of the general cultural order and its power to hold back the forces of disorder..." (p. 11). **The Slametan also dramatises the values of traditional Javanese peasant culture.** The mutual adjustment of individual wills reflects in the way men leave aside everything else because they must attend a neighbour's Slametan. Self-restraint and careful control over outward behaviour can be seen in the formal interaction of host and guests. And, as Geertz suggests, Slametans tend to occur at just those points in Javanese life when the need to assert these values is at its strongest. In the following section, we will cite two examples of Slametan, both concerning life crisis rituals. These illustrations will bring not just the points mentioned above, but also the **rich syncretism** of Javanese peasant religion, that has been spoken about earlier.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) What do the Javanese consider the two main reasons for holding a slametan? Write your answer in about five lines.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....
.....
ii) What is meant by 'Slamet'? How do the Javanese describe it? Write your answer in about five lines.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

8.4 'SLAMETAN'—TWO EXAMPLES

As has earlier been stated, Slametans are held on almost any important occasion. Geertz categorises 4 types of slametans:

- i) those centering around life-crises (birth, circumcision, marriage, death),
- ii) those associated with the Muslim ceremonial calendar (e.g. birthday of Prophet Mohammed, day of sacrifice, the last day of Fast etc.),
- iii) the 'berish de's', concerned with promoting the social integration of the village by driving out evil spirits, and
- iv) intermittent slametans, which may be held on rare occasions like departure for a long trip, change of residence, illness, sorcery etc.

For reasons of space, it will be impossible for us to look at an example of each type of Slametan. We will select two. Both are life crisis Slametans, concerning two of the most significant events in human life, namely pregnancy and marriage. You will see that the Slametan provides a kind of framework around which the details of the special rites are woven. Life-crisis rituals, in the words of Geertz "emphasis both the continuity and underlying identity of all aspects of life and the special transitions and phases through which it passes" (p.38). Let us now deal with the first rite.

8.4.1 The 'Tingkeban'

The rites concerning birth involve four major Slametans. The first, called 'Tingkeban' is celebrated in the seventh month of pregnancy. The second one is held at birth, the third 5 days after birth and the fourth when the child is seven months old. We shall be describing 'Tingkeban'—the seventh-month ceremony for the pregnant woman.

Tingkeban represents the introduction of the Javanese woman to motherhood. It is only performed for the first day. It is held at the home of the pregnant woman's mother. The following major items are essential :

- i) A dish of rice for each guest with white rice on top and yellow rice beneath the white layer symbolising purity and love respectively. It is served in a banana-leaf basket held together with a needle so that the child will be strong and sharp of mind.
- ii) Rice mixed with grated coconut and a whole stuffed chicken meant to honour Prophet Mohammed and to secure 'Slamet' for all present. Two bananas are also offered to 'Dewi Pertimah'—or Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet. This is a

classic example of the syncretism we have referred to. Fatima is converted into a Hindu 'Dewi' or goddess !

- iii) Seven small pyramids of rice symbolising the seven months of pregnancy.
- iv) Eight or nine rice balls symbolising the 'Walis', the legendary carriers of Islam to Java.
- v) A large rice pyramid to make the child big and strong.
- vi) A collection of fruit and vegetables which grow underground and which hang on trees. The former symbolise the earth, the latter the sky.
- vii) Three kinds of rice mush, white, red and a mixture of both. The white represents the 'water' of the mother, the red that of the father and their combination is believed toward off spirits.
- viii) 'Rudejak legi', a spicy fruit drink with pepper, spices and sugar. This is the most important Tingkeban food. If it tastes spicy to the woman its believed she will have a girl, if it tastes flat, a boy is believed to be in her womb.

You may have gathered, by now that Javanese peasants have a deeply-ingrained fear of spirits. At all Slametans, special offerings are made to spirits in the form of a 'sadjen'. The Tingkeban Sadjen offerings include string, incense, tobacco, betel nut, a weaving shuttle, an egg, etc. all placed in a large banana-leaf basket lined with bananas. This is kept aside for use in the ceremony proper. Once the introductory speech, the Arabic chant and tasting of the food is completed, the Tingkeban begins. It will be conducted by the midwife who will officiate at the delivery, the 'dukun baji'.

A tub of water (theoretically from seven different springs) is sprinkled with flower petals and scoopfuls are poured over the couple by the dukun baji who chants a spell for the well-being of their descendants.

The string is taken from the Sadjen and wrapped loosely around the pregnant women's waist. The husband then cuts it with a dagger (called 'Kris') while the dukun chants another spell for the easy passage of the baby from the mother's womb. Next, the weaving shuttle from the Sadjen is dropped into the woman's sarong (the sari-like garment worn by Javanese women). It is caught at the bottom by the husband's mother and cradled like a baby in her shawl. Next, two green coconuts, each decorated with the figures of a legendary couple Djanaka and Sumbadra are placed before the husband. He slides at each of them with a large knife. If both break open, an easy birth is predicted. If only one breaks, the unbroken one is said to indicate the sex of the child (a boy if Djanaka, a girl if Sumbadra). If neither coconut breaks, a long, difficult birth is predicted. We can thus see that the ceremony of Tingkeban is quite complex and very rich in the variety of food that is offered to the spirits and all those participating in it.

An interesting rite follows. The pregnant woman keeps putting on one sarong after another, pulling out the previous one from beneath. The seventh and final Sarong is made of heavy cotton which will not fade. It symbolises the lasting, life-long relationship between mother and child. In fact, the Javanese believe that keeping an item of their mother's clothing with them always helps keep a person 'Slamet'. This is because the child has rested for nine long months in his/her mother's womb, in a state of immobility which is compared to religious meditation.

The ritual ends with the couple serving the fruit drink (rudjak legi) to all present and receiving token payment. None of Geertz's informants seemed to know the

significance of this particular practice. Some said that the woman would use the money to buy medicines for her baby. Any other preparation (like making baby-clothes etc.) is frowned upon; it is believed to be unlucky. Thus we see that the Tingkeban ceremony stresses on those aspects which will pave the way for an easy birth and a healthy baby. Spirits are duly placated and deities called upon for this purpose. Let us now move on to one of the most elaborate of Javanese ceremonies, namely, the marriage ceremony. But first, check your progress.

Check Your Progress 3

i) When and why is Tingkeban performed? Answer in about five lines.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

ii) Keeping an item of the mother's clothing is believed to keep a person 'Slamet'. Why? Answer in about two lines.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

8.4.2 Marriage—'Kepanggih'an'

Until recently in Java, marriages were strictly arranged by the parents. But in recent times, personal choice and mutual understanding between the boy and girl concerned have become important. Nevertheless, the 'lamaran' or formal request by the boy's parents is still carried out for appearance's sake. Both sets of parents engage in a highly formal conversation and agree to a 'nontoni' or 'looking-over'.



The boy and his parents visit the girl's home, and more polite formalities are exchanged, whilst the girl coyly serves tea and the boy has a sly look at her. If he likes what he sees, he tells his parents on the way home, and the marriage is set.

The marriage or 'Kepanggih' ('the meeting') is always held at the girl's home. A girl's wedding is the most important ritual she is entitled to (like the boy's circumcision) and her parents are obliged to do the best they can for her wedding. On the evening before the marriage, a Slametan is given by her parents. The groom is not allowed to attend. After the Slametan, the girl is dressed in simple clothes and made to sit very still in the centre of the house for about five hours. It is believed that an angel enters her, which is why brides look so beautiful on their wedding-days. While she is seated, her mother performs the ritual of purchasing large decorations made up of various plants called the 'Kembang majang'. Two each are bought for the boy and girl, which symbolise their virginity. The mother places two of these by her daughter and the evening is over.

At an auspicious moment the next morning, the groom sets off with his entourage to the office of the 'naib', the government's religious officer who has the authority to legitimise and register marriages. The bride does not go; she is represented by her 'wali' (her legal guardian under Islamic law). At the naib's office, the groom is made to recite the relevant Arabic passages, (which he then repeats in Javanese) he then pays the wali the 5-rupiah 'mas Kawain' or 'marriage gold' and the naib concludes the ceremony by pronouncing the boy and the absent girl married.

Back at the bride's home, festivities are beginning. The assembled guests sip coffee, munch snacks and socialise with each other. The girl is dressed up by her female relatives. Traditionally, the bride and groom were dressed up like a princess and prince with elaborate dresses, jewellery and make-up. Such traditional attire is only used by the Prijaji elite these days. Abangan girls use either western dress or more elaborate versions of day-to-day attire with flowers and a little jewellery. Many of us have attended Hindu other marriage ceremonies. It is clear to the viewer that the marriage rituals are highly symbolic and their being present in great density indicates that this ritual is a central one in many societies.

In front of the house, an old sarong belonging to the girl is placed. Beneath it lies a yoke for a pair of oxen, and on top a bowl of flower-sprinkled water and an egg are placed. Sadjens are placed all around the house to ward off evil spirits. At the chosen auspicious moment (when the boy's procession has returned) the girl emerges from the house, followed by two virgin girls carrying her 'Kembang majang' (the plant decorations earlier mentioned). The boy advances from outside followed by two virgin boys carrying his 'Kembang majang'. As they draw nearer, they throw betel-nut at each other. The one who hits the other first is believed to be the dominant partner in marriage. Geertz points out that girls make sure they lose this contest. Both stand on the discarded sarong, which symbolises the girl's nakedness before her husband and touch palms in the Islamic handshake ('salaman'). The virgin girls and boys exchange 'Kembang majang'. This symbolises the mutual giving-up of virginity. The girl kneels and breaks the egg on the boy's foot, indicating her loss of purity. These days, many couples avoid this rite as it runs counter to the notion of gender equality. Both stand on the yoke symbolising their unity and inseparability.

The bride and groom return to the house where they sit immobile receiving their guests. As has been hinted earlier, immobility is associated in Java with meditation and spiritual force, as "the major road to inward strength and outward power" (p.59).

The marriage specialist chants a spell calling upon the spirits to keep the couple

and yellow rice symbolising purity and love are served. Bride and groom taste food from each other's dishes, and then the boy's dish is inverted into the girl's, making them one. This is kept aside and when it starts smelling bad a few days later, the marriage is believed to be consummated.

The Javanese cite marriage and circumcision ceremonies as ideal examples of the value of 'rukun', which Geertz translates as 'traditionalised cooperation'. By this is meant that peasants interact with each other, combine into a group, not just for the sake of group solidarity, but their own material interests as well. The amount of hard work and expense that go into holding such a ceremony would be back-breaking without the cooperation of kin and neighbours. 'Rukun' thus serves the purpose both of individual material needs and social integration.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) State whether the following are 'True' (T) or 'False' (F).
 - a) In a traditional Javanese marriage, boy and girl go to the 'naib's office and marry.
 - b) The girl's wali pays the boy to marry her.
 - c) White rice at the Slametan symbolises love.
- ii) What is meant by 'rukun'? Answer in two lines.

.....
.....

8.5 LET US SUM UP

We began this unit by describing briefly the history of Java and the specific occupational social, structural and cultural types Geertz found in the town of Modjokuto where he did his field work. We say that Java's tremendous cultural diversity contributed to the richness of its religious life.

Next, we looked at the general pattern and meanings ascribed to the core ritual in Javanese religion, the 'Slametan'. We saw how Slametans are employed at all important occasions where the values of integration and solidarity have to be reinforced.

8.6 KEY WORDS

Auspicious : having a good fortune, success or favour. We often use the phrase 'auspicious occasion' to indicate a favourable or a lucky occasion.

Commensality : coming together or gathering of individuals as an act of goodwill. In this context commensality means eating together at the same table.

Puritanical : One who professes strict moral conduct.

Syncretism : reconciliation or attempts to reconcile different belief systems.

8.7 FURTHER READINGS

Leach, Edmund R. 1968. 'Ritual' in *International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* edited by David L. Sills, Vol. 13, New York : Macmillan and Free Press.

Evan M. Zuess 1987. 'Ritual' in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* edited by Mircea Eliade, Macmillan.

8.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Animism, Hinduism and Islam, all have contributed to Javanese folk religion
- ii) The Prijaji tradition stresses strict adherence to the Islamic rituals of prayers, fast and pilgrimage to Mecca. It also includes charitable, political and social Islamic organisations.
- iii) Colonization and Western influence lead to the elite becoming highly westernised, secularised and anti-tradition.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) According to the Javanese, the main reasons for holding a Slametan are (a) making everyone feel equal so that they do not split up and (b) getting protection against troublesome spirits.
- ii) 'Slamet' refers to physical and mental equilibrium. The Javanese describe it with a phrase which means "nothing is going to happen to anyone".

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Tingkeban is performed in the 7th month of pregnancy for a first child. It is a ritual to introduce a woman to motherhood.
- ii) The nine months a child spends in the mother's womb are compared to religious meditation. The bond between mother and child is everlasting, and thus keeping some item of her clothing with oneself is believed to keep a person 'Slamet'.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) a) F
b) F
c) F
- ii) 'Rukun' can be translated as 'traditional cooperation'. This means that peasants cooperate during important ceremonies not merely for the group but because their own material interests are also at stake. 'Rukun' serves both individual as well as social goals.