

Smelling *Baraka*: Everyday Islam and Islamic Normativity

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Abstract

The category of “everyday Islam” has recently emerged to indicate the complex and ambiguous lives of Muslims. Fadil and Fernando critique this turn to the “everyday” for excluding the legibility of certain types of Muslim existence. In this paper, I argue that *baraka* emerges in and beyond the performances of *selawat* by Habib Syech bin Abdul Qadir Assegaf (Habib Syech) in Indonesia, namely that it operates like a smell, and in so doing provides an answer to Fadil and Fernando’s critique. The “ingenious magic” of smelly *baraka* evades the either/or dichotomy of the moderate Muslim performer of *selawat* and the Salafi reformer. It is only through engaging the reiteration of normativity as well as ethical ambiguity in everyday life that we are able to write and present the everyday lives of our interlocutors, take seriously the political stakes of representing Islam in the contemporary world, and engage in ethical advocacy for our often misrepresented subjects.

The contemporary convergence of the anthropology of Islam and the politics of representation of Muslims and Islam has produced scholarship focused on presenting the everyday Muslim,¹ the rough ground of the everyday,² ordinary ethics,³ and *islam mondain*⁴ to capture the conflict, ambiguity, and friction of Muslims in everyday contexts. This literature seeks to capture the “actual world in which Muslims live” with attention to the ways

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in which they exist as humans navigating the multiple demands placed on them by religious, secular, and social structures.⁵ This movement towards constructing works that reveal complexity, resistance, and ambivalence as a feature of Muslim (as in broader human) life is partially a response to the concentration of some scholars in the anthropology of Islam on piety and ethical self-formation. The analytic focus on ‘everyday Islam’ seeks to counter the representation of Islam in the contemporary world as embodied by the Salafi reformer, piety movements, and reinvigoration of Islamic norms.

Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando have critiqued this turn to everyday Islam in the anthropology of Islam for its exclusion of Salafi Muslims and the characterization of the space of the everyday “as a space in which norms *fail* to take hold rather than are (also) reiterated.”⁶ Fadil and Fernando contend that the “Salafi” for the study of everyday Islam becomes a static, ideological, and impossible form of life.⁷ “Actual” or “real” Islam, therefore, must be ambiguous. Salafi revivalists whose “understanding of religion as an all-encompassing ritual and moral discipline that has as its declared aim the abolition of ambivalence” cannot be perceived on their own terms, if we accept the claim that life is necessarily “loaded with ambiguities.”⁸ A study of the Salafi reformer in the contemporary world within the frame of the everyday, therefore, will always end in ambivalence, according to Fadil and Fernando’s critique. The pious Salafi—defined as someone who lives a life without ambiguity and strict adherence to Islam in all aspects of life—becomes not just an impossibility within the analytics of everyday Islam but non-human.⁹ To put this more broadly, John Roberts argues that this focus on the everyday in cultural studies “has weakened the grasp of ideology (and as such diminished the theory of alienation in the analysis and critique of the popular).”¹⁰ What gets to count as culture or Islam divorces ideology and the normativity driven by this ideology.

Fadil and Fernando’s critique is helpful in illuminating the weaknesses and biases underpinning approaches that fall under “everyday Islam.” In this paper, I am not interested in defining or reimagining either Salafi normativity or everyday ambiguity. I am rather reflecting upon how and if the “ingenious magic” of smell can present an alternative concept for escaping the either/or binary of Salafi (normative) vs. everyday (ambiguous) Islam.¹¹ Smell wafts from the ethnographic field as an indication of the continued importance of ambiguity, contradiction, and friction as defining features of the everyday experience of Muslims and humans. Smells mix

with other smells indicating the multiple registers that individuals must choose from to act ethically, but smell can also engulf and take over a space overpowering the senses and appearing, if only for a moment, as static. The intensity of one particular smell (agarwood) in my ethnographic work indicates the possibility of the reiteration of normativity within the space of the everyday. Smell is the sensuous connective tissue that demands an analysis which takes into account both structure and creativity. Essentializing Habib Syech's position as singularly Salafi or as only an example of the ambivalence of everyday Islamic practice falls into the trap laid bare by Fadil and Fernando and coincides with Islamophobic conceptions and media representations of Islam in the contemporary world.

In order to reveal the multiple ways that smell operates, I first introduce the various actors that descend upon the theatre of *selawat* performed by Habib Syech bin Abdul Qadir Assegaf (Habib Syech) in Indonesia. He has been performing *selawat* across Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, China, and parts of the Middle East three to six times a week, twelve months out of the year, for twenty years. (He has performed more than the Grateful Dead and most other Western artists.) In revealing the multiplicity of socio-economic statuses, ages, political leanings, and Islamic dispositions that assemble at these events, I will argue that *baraka*—variously translated as blessings,¹² holiness,¹³ charisma,¹⁴ or “nearness that allows for prosperity”¹⁵—is one of the prime movers of these events. In brief, *baraka* is better understood as the infinite possible manifestation of gifts, not dependent on reciprocation,¹⁶ from God, the one and only source of *baraka*, in both the visible and invisible world¹⁷ impacting the spiritual, economic, and social lives of people.¹⁸ The focus here is on how and under what conditions these “infinite possible manifestation of gifts” appear and operate in these performances of *selawat* as a smell. Smell appears as a description of the way in which *baraka* circulates through the events; *baraka* moves like a smell through various media impacting the social, spiritual, and economic lives of those everyday Muslims. However, smell also sticks to Habib Syech, who is one medium through which *baraka* moves. His smelly subjectivity reveals how both ambiguity and normativity act to create the enchanted theatre in which *baraka* moves. Like a smell, Habib Syech moves between the various demands placed on him by religious, social, and political demands through “clever tricks”¹⁹ and “ingenious magic.”²⁰ However, he also, at times, presents definitive positions that resonate with Salafi interpretations of contemporary life. *Baraka*'s passage into the visible and invisible

world of people's lives demands a representation of Muslims in the contemporary world that simultaneously takes seriously normative, ideological claims which may offend the liberal-secular imaginary and ambiguity as a feature of modern life.

Beginning the Path to *Selawat*

Habib Syech emerged onto the steps of the hotel dressed in a thick white button-down shirt, a green sarong, a tightly woven white turban, leather shoes, and a cane in his right hand. He stopped at the top of the stairs and smiled. The forty or so people who had anxiously awaited his arrival in the hotel lobby and parking lot jumped to attention and rushed to greet Habib Syech. The number of people waiting in or near the hotel for Habib Syech varied depending on the event, but it typically ranged from ten to fifty. They converged on Habib Syech to take pictures, greet him, and touch him. The police officers who would escort the entourage of people and vehicles to the event were the first to get photos. Habib Syech was always escorted by at least one police vehicle on the way to the events. The police also occasionally sponsored Habib Syech's *selawat*. On this day, however, the conversation between the police and Habib Syech was cut short by Ali,²¹ one of the leaders of Habib Syech's fan club, Syechermania. He was not only an avid attendee but instrumental in organizing the many moving parts that had to migrate between villages, cities, and countries every night.

In addition to the local Syechermania organizers, leaders of the local Banser were also waiting their turn to take a picture with Habib Syech and kiss or touch their forehead to his hand. Banser is an Islamic militia tied to the largest Islamic organization in the world, Nahdatul Ulama (NU).²² They, like the police, serve as security at Habib Syech's events and sponsor them. I often observed individuals place their nose on the hand of Habib Syech and breathe in deeply. Kissing the ring or hand of a religious teacher, *kyai*, is customary for many in Indonesia, but the breathing in sometimes associated with this gesture will become important as we consider the place of smell at these events. After these quick gestures, Banser posed for a series of pictures.

Moving one step closer to the black van that awaited him, Habib Syech took more pictures with other VIP guests such as the relatives of the sponsor of the event (a local religious teacher), the head of the regional National Zakat Amil Agency (BAZNAS), and governmental representatives from this regency in West Java. VIP guests would typically have dinner with Habib Syech and sit on the stage with him during the event. They could

also include governors, members of the House of Representatives (DPR-RI), village heads, a Christian financial advisor, members of Habib Syech's family, leaders of NU, leaders of Muhammadiyah, leaders of Front Pembela Islam (FPI), Shi'i Muslims, members of other *selawat* groups, visiting teachers from the Middle East, and even the odd a white Irish American. Here, we begin to see the wide variety of actors who descend upon the theatre of *selawat*. Government representatives at both the local and national level from conflicting parties often share the same stage. Habib Rizieq, the leader of FPI, may appear as a VIP guest one night, and local representatives of NU or Muhammadiyah appear as VIP guests on other nights. Some nights, all three may be present on the stage.

Parsing Indonesia's Islamic Organizations

NU and Muhammadiyah, the two largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, represent two often conflicting styles of engagement with Islamic practice and belief. Muhammadiyah, founded in 1912, was a modernist movement with "roots in both Middle Eastern developments and Indonesian circumstances."²³ The Muhammadiyah sought to purify Islam of local customs such as Sufi practices and focused on building schools, hospitals, and orphanages. It was part of a larger Salafi reform movement connected to the thought of Rashid Rida, Muhammad 'Abduh, and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani from Cairo that sought to return to the unity of the early Islamic community.²⁴ NU formed in 1926, partially as a response to Muhammadiyah, and expressed the need for continued engagement with local traditions and displays of Islamic piety, such as *ziyara* and *wayang* (shadow puppet theatre). These two do not remain in dialectical tension; there is a wide spectrum in both NU and Muhammadiyah positions on practice and belief. However, what is a novel phenomenon is the widespread presence of representatives of these organizations as well as practitioners who identify with either organization at an event like *selawat*.²⁵ Robert Hefner has argued that the formation of these organizations and their development through the twenty-first century was crucial to creating a democratic Indonesia and "civic habits" of "tolerance, autonomy and skepticism towards the all pretending state."²⁶

Democracy and "civil Islam" in Indonesia have recently been challenged by the call for the implementation of sharia as well as the violence and intolerance of groups such as FPI, indicating a "conservative turn" in Indonesia following *Reformasi* (1998).²⁷ Whether or not this "conservative turn" in Indonesian Islamic society is abrupt is up for debate. Hefner has

argued for attention to the multiple “sharia imaginaries” that inform contemporary Indonesian understandings.²⁸ The distinctly Indonesian understanding of Islamic law identifies “sharia and the divine good with modern social and educational improvements,” rather than strict rules that seek to eliminate ambiguity.²⁹ The existence of an understanding of sharia justified by *maṣlaḥa* or ‘public interest’ arising from Muhammadiyah leadership in the twentieth century is an essential component to understanding the multiple possible interpretations and understandings of sharia in Indonesia.³⁰ However, the showings in 2016 of FPI against then-governor of Jakarta, Ahok, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, for blasphemy against Islam are a powerful example of the success of Salafi interpretations of Sharia based on strict rules.³¹

FPI was formed in 1998 by Habib Muhammad Rizieq bin Hussein Syihab (Habib Rizieq). Unlike Muhammadiyah and NU, FPI is an overtly political organization that wants “the establishment of an Islamic Party under FPI control whose main program is the Application of Islamic Sharia in Kaffah in the frame of the Republic of Indonesia.”³² Feener traces the use of “Kaffah” in public discourse and political regulation to Aceh in 2000 and the Salmaan Mosque during the New Order (1966-1998).³³ “*Islam yang kaffah*” (Islam which is comprehensive) originates, according to Michael Feener, in the new models of Islamic education, namely the “*tarbiya* movement built upon foundations developed in the Middle East by the Muslim Brotherhood.”³⁴ This movement stresses the application of Sharia in its totality in order to “transform individuals to better prepare their souls for success in both this world and the next.”³⁵

The “kaffah” movement in contemporary Indonesia has become a major force in Indonesian society as seen in the 2019 election where both the current president, Joko Widodo, and his challenger, Prabowo Subianto Djojohadikusumo, are trying to appear as friends of the *Islam yang kaffah* by appearing with figures such as Habib Rizieq, the founder of FPI.³⁶ However, Fealy and White have argued that FPI’s Salafism is “largely symbolic” because of their lack of strict codes.³⁷ Their Salafism “manifests not in everyday practice but in the Islamic identity it presents to the public through its vigilant actions and public demonstrations.”³⁸ Although Greg and Fealy are surely indicating what seems to be the most public and impactful presentations by FPI, this is not to say that Salafism has not entered everyday life for many individuals associated with FPI or self-identified as Salafi.

For example, I lived in a *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) run by a supporter of FPI located in a community that identified as Salafi. The rhythms of life were very much impacted by Salafi ideology. I was instructed on proper ways to dress, pray, and eat. This reflected the policing of behavior informed by Salafi ideology at Habib Syech's events. I once had a man grab a water bottle from my hand because I was standing up and drinking at one of the *selawat* events. He informed me this was not the proper way to drink according to the hadith (one should, rather, be seated while drinking). The Ramadan raids led by members of FPI and the many gatherings held by FPI against religious pluralism, Ahok, the Ahmadiyya, and Shi'is are all ways in which they express their attempts at the implementation of Salafism.³⁹ The place of FPI within the performances of *selawat* is additionally interesting considering the presence of Shi'i Muslims at the events.

Habib Syech has claimed that he has seen Shi'i Muslims beating their chests (*laṭam*) at his events and that he has no problem with this, so long as they do not cause any trouble. This "ritualized striking of one's body in grief" is an inextricable expression of Shi'i piety often performed during the remembrance of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at Karbala.⁴⁰ Beating the chest with the hands and arms without shedding blood is a recent (late twentieth century) transformation.⁴¹ However, the presence of Shi'i forms of Islam—or, more aptly termed, "alid piety"—in Indonesia reach back to the fourteenth century.⁴² The distinction between Shi'i sectarianism and "alid piety" is significant in understanding the ways in which reverence for the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*) is embedded not just in Shi'i sensibilities in Indonesia but in larger trends in Indonesian Islam.⁴³ Prior to the mid-twentieth century, forms of Shi'i institutionalism were few and far between, but in the 1970s Shi'i organizations under the label *madhhab ahl al-bayt* (the *madhhab* of the Prophet's family) became a part of the Indonesian Islamic landscape.⁴⁴ The *madhhab ahl al-bayt* became active on university campuses and in *pesantrens* across Indonesia.⁴⁵ However, the current place of the Shi'a in Indonesia is tenuous at best.⁴⁶ For example, the anti-Shi'a National Alliance (*Aliansi Nasional Anti Syiah Indonesia*) was established on April 20, 2014 in order to build "unity and brotherhood in the face of Shia heresy in Indonesia."⁴⁷ The formation of this organization as well as the multiple incidents of violence against the Shi'a in the last ten years, including the burning, beating, and killing of Shi'i Muslims, indicate the unstable place of the Shi'a in contemporary Indonesia.⁴⁸ It is therefore surprising

that Habib Syech would claim to see Shi'is performing *laṭam* during *selawat* and that he has no problem with this.

Members of NU, Muhammadiyah, FPI, and the Shi'a are all present in the crowds that amass around these events of devotional piety. There is a wide range of ages and socio-economic statuses at the events. One individual rode his bike from his *pesantren* for twelve hours to reach one event while another group of individuals rents rooms in five-star hotels near the events to watch them through Facebook Live. This is not typical of Indonesian Islamic events, and as we will see, it is Habib Syech's smelly subjectivity that allows him to appeal to such a diverse crowd. There is, furthermore, little reason to appeal to so many groups for financial or social gain. NU would like to claim Habib Syech and has tens of millions of followers; he could capitalize on an affiliation with NU, but instead he actively separates himself from it.

Jumping into the Police Car

Habib Syech chatted with those who wanted pictures, asking about their families and slowly slipping closer to the black van. The parking lot in front of the hotel had suddenly jumped to attention after very little movement. Seven or eight vans and SUVs lined up with their hazards flashing. Earlier in the day, I had been permitted to ride with the police officers to the *selawat*. I was instructed to quickly run to the police car waiting to lead the entourage as it would be the first car in the caravan. I laughed as Ali shouted, "Jimi, you need to lose weight to beat me to the police car." I jumped into the back seat, and Ali shouted into his radio, "*siap* (ready), *siap, siap*." Ali and other organizers were serious about getting the caravan moving as laughter, excitement, and chaos punctuated the air. The police escort was given the okay to proceed, and the procession jumped into motion.

The police officers navigated the caravan through packed streets. One officer oversaw driving, and the other controlled the lights, sounds, and the speaker announcing our presence. We drove in the middle of the street, pushing traffic on both sides to the edge of the road. I watched with a heightened sense of anxiety as one police officer shouted over the loud-speaker, "hey you, please move over," accompanied by a high-pitched siren as we pushed a motorbike into oncoming traffic. We reached the toll road, and the officer was quick to point out that he was going to pay the toll and that I should take note that the police are not corrupt. We sped along the toll road, sirens blaring, closely followed by a trail of cars shifting through

lanes of traffic like a blinking tail. Our first stop was always to the home of the person sponsoring the event or to one of the prominent religious or governmental authorities in the town. In this case, it was a kyai of a local *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school). This kyai had some Arab heritage and was keen to express this through his food and drink offerings. A goat hung from a spit in the far corner of the room, and younger members of the family lopped off chunks of meat to pass around the room, which was quickly filled with men from the caravan and the local family. The aromatics of *mandi* rice—yellow rice cooked with lamb as well as cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, turmeric, and garlic—filled the air. This food was very different from the typical white rice, vegetables, and chicken that were normally served. The performance of identity through the presentation of Arab food is significant here as it contributes to the possible reason for Habib Syech's ability to appeal to such a wide variety of people.

Habib Syech is a *sayyid* (descendant of Prophet Muhammad) whose mother is from the island of Java and father from the Hadramawt (Yemen). His heritage is part of what makes him appealing in Indonesia. As one of my interlocutors stated:

Javanese people used to not accept them (Hadramis), and the Wali Songo did not use the name Habib. The Wali Songo were previously able to be received because of this. Now, people want to give them honor. Now, many people know and understand Islam and that the Habib are higher than the kyai.

The Wali Songo (nine saints of Java) are often referenced as the purveyors of Islam in Indonesia both during their lifetime and after. However, the connection between contemporary figures like Habib Syech and the Wali Songo has only recently been recognized, as the place of Hadramis in Indonesia has not always been positive. This converges with Woodward et al.'s argument that Habib Syech relies

on what Bourdieu (1991) refers to as the 'religious capital' of Hadhrami sayyid to contest dominance in the new, primarily urban, social spaces that have developed in Indonesia since the 1980s. This religious capital is based on the reverence that traditional Indonesian (and other) Muslims have for sayyids, as the embodiment of the *barakah* (blessing) of the Prophet and the *Ṭarīqa* 'Alawiyya.⁴⁹

Woodward et al. rightly notes that *baraka* seems to be driving these events and that Habib Syech's position as a Hadrami *sayyid* contributes to the ap-

pearance of *baraka*. Syech's ability to speak Javanese is certainly another aspect of what has spurred his success. However, when we consider Habib Syech's rise to popularity in Malaysia and other islands of Indonesia, where many do not speak Javanese and are not all that interested in him as a figure of Java, the importance of his status as a *sayyid* who embodies *baraka* seems to be an indispensable component of what drives the popularity of his performances. Yet the connection between *baraka* and lineage as well as the Sufi order (*ṭarīqa 'Alawiyya*) is only part of the story.

The establishment of the *ṭarīqa 'Alawiyya*'s formal practices and institutional development takes place within the history of the Bā 'Alawī people of the Hadramawt valley in Yemen. The formation of the community begins with Aḥmad bin 'Isā of Basra's move from Iraq in the tenth century.⁵⁰ It is through Aḥmad bin 'Isā that members of the Bā 'Alawī claim descent from prophet Muhammad. However, the *ṭarīqa 'Alawiyya* does not form until the thirteenth century with Muhammad b. 'Ali (d. 1255).⁵¹ This was, furthermore, not developed into an "institutional complex of Sufi practices" until the late fourteenth century with 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Saqqāf (d. 1416).⁵² This institutional complex becomes connected to texts of previous pious Bā 'Alawī predecessors, the ritual of "Saqqāf Presencing,"⁵³ and the physical space of Tarim in the Hadramawt valley.⁵⁴ The Saqqāf Presencing resonates with the *selawat* performed in contemporary Indonesia. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Saqqāf created "litanies (*rātīb al-Saqqāf*)" which are used at the Saqqāf Presencing and introduced the use of flutes and tambourines to accompany its performance.⁵⁵ The songs of *selawat* have links to both the Indonesian past (given its songs in Javanese) and the Hadramawt litanies of al-Saqqāf. In addition to this institutional complex, detailed by Engseong Ho, the character of the 'Alawiyya *ṭarīqa* becomes exemplified by imitation of the Prophet Muhammad both internally and externally through the study of the *hadiths* and following the pious Bā 'Alawī predecessors.⁵⁶ The Bā 'Alawī descent from Prophet Muhammad and with the creation and development of the *ṭarīqa 'Alawiyya* (focused on imitation of the Prophet through this connection to the pious ancestors (*sayyid*)) result in the 'Alawiyya "claim to special *baraka* based on Sharifian descent from the Prophet, an aspect which at times—at least viewed from the outside—seems to overshadow the mystical content."⁵⁷

The *ṭarīqa 'Alawiyya* arrived in the Dutch East Indies in the eighteenth century through trading routes between southern Arabia and Southeast Asia.⁵⁸ The early twentieth century saw a "hadrami awakening" which

posed the Hadramawt as the homeland and created institutions for consolidating Hadrami identity around the homeland.⁵⁹ This, however, became problematic as more and more Hadramis intermarried with Indonesians and made the Dutch East Indies their home. In the 1950s, Hadramis in general (including Bā ‘Alawī) became fully integrated into newly independent Indonesia.⁶⁰ It is into this environment that Habib Syech was born in 1961. He is one of the sixteen children of al-Habib Abdul Kadir bin Abdurrahman Assegaf.

Being born into this specific lineage is certainly intertwined with being a part of the *ṭarīqa* ‘Alawiyya; detangling the importance of the ‘Alawiyya from broader Hadrami identity and practice would certainly be problematic. Understating the importance of Sufism in the formation of Indonesian Islamic sensibilities would additionally be a mistake. Howell and Zamhari make the case that the emergence of not just Habib Syech’s *majelis selawat* but also of the many other, often smaller, *majelis selawat* and *majelis zikir* groups “draw on the ritual repertoire of traditional Sufi Islam” while not being confined to many of the traditional components of Sufism, such as initiation.⁶¹ However, in recounting some of his first attempts at preaching around Java, Habib Syech makes a point to indicate how often he was not accepted in Indonesia because of his Arab appearance. He has reminded me, several times, of when he had mosque doors slammed in his face when he was first traveling around Indonesia preaching because “they did not want any Arabs in their mosque.” Although it is difficult to assess the validity of this statement, this sentiment has been echoed by several of my interlocutors who do not have any desire to attend his events because of Habib Syech’s Arab identity.

Habib Syech’s Hadrami heritage and status as a *sayyid* contribute to his popularity and his ability to facilitate *baraka* flowing through the events, and there is undoubtedly more acceptance than in the past of the authority and place of Hadramis in Indonesian society as exemplars of the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. Many Habibs now preach, teach about the hadiths, hold government positions, and head Sufi orders in Indonesia. And it was not until Habib Syech started performing *selawat* that he began drawing tens of thousands. Interestingly, when asked directly, he separates himself from Sufism. He “knows *selawat*” and thinks different Sufi orders are simply different paths to the same source, but he himself does not follow or promote a given *ṭarīqa*. This is not to say that he has not had initiation by blood into the *ṭarīqa* ‘Alawiyya or that the *selawat* he performs does not

resonate with Sufi sensibilities. However, *selawat* as a form of Islamic expression extends beyond the spaces significantly dominated by Sufism. The popularity of Habib Syech cannot be simply understood as stemming from his structural place as a *sayyid* embodying Sufism, and it is not this *sayyid* identity that singularly allows *baraka* to appear at these events.

Ascending the Stage

We quickly ate, more pictures were taken, and we exited the house. I could not find my sandals, which had disappeared at events before; I pushed my way through the crowd of a few hundred people searching for them. Habib Syech saw this, laughed, and asked everyone to move so that my sandals could be recovered. I found them, and a member of the local Syechermania told me to get in his car. As we grew closer to the event, traffic became gridlocked. Buses, cars, motorbikes, and dump trucks were packed full of people wearing Syechermania jackets, waving flags, singing, and looking excited. Habib Syech stuck his hand out of the window of his van and shouted, “as-salām ‘alaykum!” He was greeted with high pitched screams, “wa-‘alaykum as-salām!” and a river of hands reaching for and slapping the van in the middle of stopped traffic. More police officers and members of Banser cleared a path, and we finally made it to the back of the stage cordoned off by police and other volunteers. However, there were still many people filling in any empty space between the stage and cars.

Habib Syech’s group of musicians, Ahbaabul Musthofa, was already playing. The bass of the drums could be heard from nearly a mile away. The caravan pulled up as a sea of men in white pants and white shirts with FPI stamped on their backs formed two lines from the cars to the stage. They linked arms and pushed backward those who had gathered to yield a space large enough for one person to pass through at a time. I stepped out of the car and was greeted by some familiar faces from Syechermania and many unfamiliar faces. In the swirl of people, I was yanked through the crowd and pushed face-first through the arms and shoulders of FPI to enter the path to the stage. I stumbled up the very steep stairs to the stage trying to hold onto my sandals. I looked out to see thirty thousand⁶² people with flags, glow sticks, and blow up noisemakers facing the stage. The *hadroh* musicians were located directly in front of the main stage on a lower stage blocked off from the crowd by a large metal fence. Members of Banser and Syechermania filled the area around the *hadroh* group. The field in front of the stage rose slowly and was smashed full of people. Red, orange, blue, and

white lights pulsed, illuminating the hands, heads, and bodies of those gathered to participate in this performance. The air was thick, smelly, and humid.

FPI members, now behind the stage, shouted, “Allahu Akbar” (God is the Greatest) as Habib Syech stepped out of his van. They held back anyone attempting to reach Habib Syech (and there were many: people often tried to jump over the shoulders of those holding the line; Habib Syech had repeatedly previously been pushed to the ground by those trying to touch him). As he reached the stage, those already there rose to kiss his hand while thousands began yelling, throwing glow sticks in the air, and standing to greet him. He carefully made his way to the front of the stage where his microphone sat on a large pillow along with a carefully selected arrangement of Yakult, lemon water, ice, baskets of fruits, and fragrant flowers. He smiled and waved, and the emcee, who also acted as a hype man, introduced the local governmental regent. The regent gave a short speech welcoming everyone and thanking those religious and political leaders who were present on the stage as well as Syechermania, Banser, and the police. The emcee then took back the microphone and introduced Habib Syech. Habib Syech picked up the microphone and released the sound of *selawat* from deep within his belly:

Yā rabbi ṣalli ‘alā Muḥammad
 Yā rabbi ṣalli ‘alayhi wasallim
 Yā rabbi ṣalli ‘alā Muḥammad
 Yā rabbi ṣalli ‘alayhi wasallim
 Yā rabbi ballighu al-waṣīla
 Yā rabbi khuṣṣahu bi-l-faḍīla
 Yā rabbi waraḍa ‘anni al-ṣaḥāba
 Yā rabbi waraḍa ‘ani al-sulāla
 Yā rabbi ṣalli ‘alā Muḥammad
 Yā rabbi ṣalli ‘alayhi wasallim
 Yā rabbi ṣalli ‘alā Muḥammad
 Yā rabbi ṣalli ‘alayhi wasallim

[O God, pray for Muhammad
 O God, peace be upon him
 O God, pray for Muhammad
 O God, peace be upon him
 O God, give him the path to Allah

The climax of the chorus is always a resounding *Allāh!* with confetti thrown in the air. The air above the masses of people resembled multicolored snow. With the conclusion of *Yā Ḥanāna*, Habib Syech took a break, as he usually did in the middle of performing. He was not known to give long speeches during that period; indeed he often says very little during the performances. He allows VIP guests to give speeches or sermons. At the events, his comments were usually restricted to things like proscribing drugs, alcohol, judging other people, doing *main-main* (playing around sexually), and to pray for people to be good. That is, his appeal is not due to his sermons or theological positions. During this specific event, a local cleric gave a passionate sermon; even though I was very close to the stage, the noise of the crowd made it difficult to make out distinct words as he shouted into the microphone.

In the climax of this performance of *selawat*, the emotions and ecstasy expressed by participants resonates with Timothy Daniels' analysis of the *Maiyah* movement led by Emha Ainun Nadjib, Cak Nun. Daniels argues that the *Maiyah* events, which included "*wirid* (Qur'anic recitation), *zikir* and *selawatan* and Cak Nun's inspirational talks create a powerful, encompassing, ecstatic mood and feeling of communion with other participants and as a community of equal believers connected with Allah and Prophet Muhammad."⁶³ Daniels indicates how these events have grown over a ten-year period, creating a flexible code that escapes routinization and enables an enduring sense of *communitas* and equality. This seems to be a definitive aspect of Habib Syech's *selawat*, and yet it does not seem to be the only mover of these events.

When he finished, Habib Syech picked up the microphone and began *selawat* once more. The crowd again erupted into singing, swaying, and crying. Toward the end of the performance, at the beginning of *Mahalul Qiyam*, the last song before the Indonesian national anthem, I was ushered onto the musicians' bus (I would be traveling with them for the next few days). To escape the crowds in a timely manner, anyone who would be traveling with the musicians, Habib Syech's family, and other VIP guests were always told to get into their respective vehicles at the beginning of *Mahalul Qiyam*—for the moment Habib Syech finished, people would rush the stage. Keeping the crowds at bay was difficult. The musicians piled onto the bus, bought by the Central Javanese Government. The bus driver, with his signature water bottle full of thick, sweet, black coffee, started the bus and we crept through the crowds. The twenty-five musicians were very vocal

on the bus. There were lots of jokes and lively discussion. When we finally reached where we would sleep for the night, I was walking with one of the musicians who looked at me and said, "James, you look tired." I replied, "Well, it's about one in the morning." He laughed and said, "I cannot sleep; the *baraka* from the event makes me excited." He inhaled through his teeth and threw his hands in the air.

His comment that the *baraka* from the event kept him up at night coincided with the hundreds of interviews I had done with male and female participants from diverse backgrounds and varied Islamic sensibilities. Over eighty percent of people indicated that they primarily came for *baraka* when simply asked, "why did you come to this event?" *Baraka*, furthermore, appeared on T-shirts worn by many participants: "Pemburu Baraka" (Hunting Baraka). Women ran past me, almost knocking me down, screaming "*baraka, baraka, baraka*" as they reached to slap the shoulder of Habib Syech. However, in inquiring as to what exactly *baraka* was or at least how it operated, my interlocutors reiterated the impossibility of speaking about *baraka*. It was something that could not be seen, understood, or 'captured.' The only thing that could be observed were the results of *baraka* (whether spiritual, economic, or social). These results were always positive: that is, *baraka* never appeared as a force that brought misfortune or was intended to teach a lesson. The positive results operated in both the visible and invisible world. *Baraka* could result in the success of a business or the assistance of a loved one into heaven, and *baraka* was described as flowing infinitely. It is a gift in the truest sense of the word; as Derrida argues, "for there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter gift, or debt."⁶⁴ Gratitude, therefore, annuls the gift, and identifying the gift as a gift no longer allows it to remain in the category of gift. The results that people describe as from *baraka* can only take place after the gift has been given and the results are known. The results are not the gift; they are a repercussion of the gift. The next section elaborates how perfume emerges as one way of conceiving of the ontology and circulation of *baraka*.

Smelling Baraka

One night in front of Habib Syech's building in Solo, Indonesia, during Ramadan 2016, I met with one of Habib Syech's musicians (the Ahbaabul Musthofa), whom I had traveled with and become close to. We discussed our days and how fasting was going. I then asked him if he could tell me a story about or explain *baraka*. The response I had typically received when

I asked about *baraka* was that it could be felt but not seen, felt but not comprehended (*ditangkap*). However, this response was different. He said,

Baraka is like perfume. When you go to this *majelis* or *selawat*, it rubs off on you. You cannot smell it, but when you leave, others can smell it. It is the best kind of smell. Other people smell it, and it makes them want to also go to the *selawat*.

This description of *baraka* as perfume was initially striking because of the prominence of the olfactory at Habib Syech's events. Several different vendors always sell perfume at these events. I was constantly offered little bottles of non-alcoholic perfume to wipe on my hands and neck. Perfume was often smothered on my hands whether I wanted it or not. At the end of some *selawat* events, a vendor would walk across the stage offering perfume. He would swipe the dipstick from the perfume bottle across the hands of all those who reached out. However, perfume was not the only way in which smell rubbed off at the events. I observed a member of Syechermania with a makeshift smoke machine. The machines had a small fan attached behind a container full of hot coals, upon which he placed agarwood—sending plumes of sweet, woody smoke through the crowd. I began to identify agarwood as an active participant in creating the sensorium of *selawat*. This prevalence of smell, however, was not simply a way of demarcating space or making the smell of *selawat* pleasurable. Thinking back to how the musician put it to me, it is also a representation of the way in which *baraka* operates; the way it pulls people to *selawat* and extends beyond it.

The Arabic word *baraka* (pl. *barakāt*) is often translated into English as blessings, holiness, sanctity, supernatural power, or charisma.⁶⁵ *Baraka* appears in the Qur'an thirty-two times and the Qur'an itself is a medium through which *baraka* can be transferred. It appears in biographies of the Prophet Muhammad⁶⁶ and contemporary Islamic discourse. In the anthropology of religion and the scholarly literature on "everyday Islam," it has been referred to but often in passing; it remains on the fringes of what might be considered an object of study.⁶⁷ In seeking to illuminate how smell and *baraka* operate, now, I would suggest that we can productively turn to Michel de Certeau's ontology of smell in *The Possession at Loudun*.

Smell, writes de Certeau, "guarantees, judges, and precedes seeing."⁶⁸ Prior to speech or visualization, *baraka* is known through smell; and unlike seeing, "a space is qualified by olfactory impressions before it can be described or gestured."⁶⁹ Walking into a room filled with agarwood transforms the space before a participant can express what is happening. The

olfactory, furthermore, fills a space in a way that makes it inescapable; even if you close your nose, odors still reach the olfactory epithelium, the tissue responsible for smelling, through the back of the nose via the breath. Smell is inescapable, and even prior to perception; it “changes the surface of things before you into a volume in which you are caught.”⁷⁰ The moments at which agarwood overwhelms the senses or mixes with other sensations are representative of the moments in which *baraka* manifests. Smell operates, according to de Certeau, as an “ingenious magic” which

“brings into view a new heaven, a new earth, and an infinity of marvels we think are present.” Everything must take place as if it were not theatre; everything works thanks to the complicity maintained between an illusionist art and reality. The enchanted site lets doubt linger. An inner time resists the ingenious composition of places. “At the same time,” adds d’Aubignac, “we are well being fooled.”⁷¹

This “magic” should not be equated with those classic theories of religion which presented it as a step in the evolutionary development of religion. It is not an index of religious development, but rather indicates the way in which smell creates an enchanted theatre. A theater of infinite possibilities, opportunities, movements, and potentiality that proceeds with actors who play the parts ensuring its continuation while also somehow “being fooled.”

The theatre is the performance of *selawat* upon which the multiplicity of divergent actors descend. *Baraka* is the “tricky magic” that brings an infinity of marvels into the theatre of *selawat*. Returning to my definition of *baraka*, this infinity of marvels are those infinite possible manifestations of gifts from God impacting people’s social, economic, and spiritual lives. The “new heaven” and “new earth” which arrive in the enchanted theatre of *selawat* are the visible and invisible world in which *baraka* moves like a smell. The collation of this smelly magic creates an enchanted site that allows “doubt to linger,” dependent on time, that resists the bounding of space but will also become affixed in space. Smell here appears to operate as both a tactic and strategy (in de Certeau’s terms). It is at once time-dependent, infinite, and allows for a site of enchantment (as tactic) while also, at times, establishing (as strategy) “a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats can be managed.”⁷² The smell of agarwood mixes with other smells to create new smells (as tactic) and will also strike the olfactory epithelium that makes it inescapable. It is my interlocutor’s description of *baraka* as “like a perfume” that initially attuned my attention to the preva-

lence of smell at *selawat*. However, if *baraka* circulates like a smell through the events through numerous media, it is Habib Syech's smelly subjectivity that indicates how ambiguity and normativity act together in creating the conditions under which the unlimited potential emergence of gifts (*baraka*) arises.

Islamic Normativity and Human Ambiguity

During one of the many long car rides with Habib Syech, I asked him about his relationship with FPI leader Habib Rizieq and the leaders of *pesantren* Ngruki. Habib Rizieq has shared center-stage with Habib Syech at the latter's events, where they wave at the assembled crowds together. The Bali bombers of 2002 and 2005 had ties to *pesantren* Ngruki. Habib Syech responded:

James, they are good men. I know them and have met with them, but the government approached me one year ago to help them stop young people from doing narcotics and drinking alcohol. If I spend time with them or say something that seems to agree with them, the government comes and asks me why I am becoming radical. So, I have to be like a scent (*penciuman*).

Habib Syech uses an Indonesian word that captures smell, wind, and scent to describe the way in which he inhabits the world. Agarwood is not simply an element in the assemblage of material practice but indicates a way of living in the everyday that exists in the in-betweens or ambiguity which allows for millions of Indonesians from varied backgrounds to support these events and contributes to the possibility of the emergence of *baraka*. Habib Syech's ingenious magic is defined by his ability to be like a scent. He appeals to many different groups at once through appearing ambiguous. He does not associate himself with one political, religious, or governmental organization. Competing (indeed conflicting) Islamic representatives appear on the same stage in support of *selawat*, and the events are supported by government officials from different positions. However, in the same way that smell can mix with other smells and move with the wind, smell can also be overpowering and definitive. The ambiguity of Habib Syech's position which allows *baraka* to manifest like a smell in the events is legible to the academic discourse on everyday Islam, but this smelly subjectivity is also responsive to Fadil and Fernando's critique.

Habib Syech often encapsulates his mission in the phrase "kedamaian masyarakat" (community peace), but his view on the place of Islam in In-

Indonesian democracy reflect his position that Islam is and should be the foundation of society (although he is not against democracy). Habib Syech's reiteration of norms and understanding of Islam's place in Indonesia reflects *Islam yang Kaffah*: shariah (Islamic law) as a complete method for living life in order to prepare for this life and the next. Explicating the full range of ideological concepts that Habib Syech brings into conversation is not within the purview of this paper. Nor is explicating the affective way in which he reiterates norms (as noted earlier, the reason he is popular is not for his sermons or speech acts). Here I briefly indicate one moment in which he is reiterating norms that are in line with certain Salafi interpretations of Islam as a foundation for society (*Islam yang Kaffah*). I will then use this to read Habib Syech's performance of the song, "yā la-l-waṭan" (O my Homeland).

Habib Syech has been vocal about what he sees as the uselessness of Muslims going to churches to protect the church or breaking their fast at a church. He also criticizes "liberal" ideas of tolerance that he sees as creeping into NU. At a *selawat* in 2014, he said,

This has begun in Indonesia, people who confess they are excellent people, liberal people, people who say every religion is the same, God is the same. What? (*loh*)... These people say they are *ahli Sunnah wa Jemaah*, and that this is tolerance. Run away from them. Particularly, there is a person in East Java who says that he is *Ahli Sunnah wa Jemaah* and NU. However, the brain of many NU people has been damaged by people outside who have said that all religions are the same. They preach (*dakwa*) in churches, but this is not *dakwa*. This is insulting to the religion of Islam in front of disbelievers (*orang-orang kafir*). Be careful. This has begun by many people who are NU but damaged... These people are ruining our nation with their ideas of tolerance.

This type of understanding of tolerance coincides with Jeremy Menchik's recent proposal of communal tolerance as indicative of the way in which groups such as NU and Muhammadiyah "favor a communal and religious democracy that is similar to the vision of strong multiculturalists and is marked by a convergence of liberal individual rights and group-differentiated rights within a system of legal pluralism."⁷³ However, Habib Syech also differs from that model in that he sees himself as working with the government to transform not just Islamic society but all of Indonesia. Habib Syech is not interested in interfaith conversations about the nature of God or liberal-secular ideas of tolerance. These views are ruining the nation. Rather,

he is interested in spreading the values and superior ethics of Islam through *selawat* that make people better Muslims and help the nation. The fact that Christians, Hindus, and white Irish ethnographers attend his events is not a reflection of his pluralism but an indication of the superior qualities of Islam which can transform the participants and the nation as a whole and the world. Every event in Indonesia concludes with a singing of the national anthem. For his part, Habib Syech performs the song “*yā la-l-waṭan*” (O Homeland) at almost every event.

yā la-l-waṭan, yā la-l-waṭan, yā la-l-waṭan
ḥubbu al-waṭan min al-yman
wa al-takun min al-ḥirman
inhaḍū hla al-waṭan

Indonesia bilādi
 anta ‘unwānu al-fakhama
 kullu man ya’tika yaūma
 ṭamiḥa yalqa ḥimama

(Switching to Indonesian)
 pusaka hati wahai tanah airku
 cintaku dalam imanku
 jangan halangkan nasibmu
 bangkitlah hai bangsaku

Indonesia negeriku
 engkau panji martabatku
 siapa datang mengancammu
 kan binasa di bawah durimu

[O homeland, O homeland, O homeland
 I love my county of faith
 And do not be deprived
 Rise up people of the homeland

Indonesia is my country
 You are the title
 Everyone who comes to you
 Aspiring to protect you

Heirloom heart O homeland
 Your love is in my faith
 Do not hinder your destiny
 Rise up my nation

Indonesia my country
 You are the banner of my dignity
 Whoever arrives to threaten you
 Will perish under your thorn]

Although it may not be immediately evident, this song celebrates not only the Indonesian nation but also Islam as a foundation for it. Islam as a total system imbues the affect of this song. Fists rhythmically shake in unison as the crowds sing, the lyrics bridging the gap between Indonesian democracy and Islamic ideals. This is not a performance of a separate-but-equal-style communal democracy; this is a movement to Islamize the nation through *selawat*. It is peaceful but persistent. This movement is interested in understanding Islam in its totality as a perfect system for life related to the distinctive Salafism of Indonesia spread through *selawat*.

Conclusion

The rise of “everyday Islam” as an attempt to perceive the complex and ambiguous lives of Muslims appears as a response to the scholarly representation of pious Muslims by authors such as Saba Mahmood, Charles Hirschkind, and Hussein Agrama. Fadil and Fernando critique this turn to the “everyday” for excluding certain types of Muslim existence, especially Salafi Muslims. In my field sites, smell gusts from the ethnographic field as a description of the movement of *baraka* as well as a cultivated subjectivity that allows *baraka* to emerge. The smelly ambiguity that Habib Syech fosters allows for *baraka*’s movement and does not impede Salafi views from entering the sphere of possibilities. Essentializing Habib Syech’s position as singularly Salafi falls into the trap laid bare by Fadil and Fernando and coincides with Islamophobic conceptions and media representations of Islam in the contemporary world.

Islamophobic conceptions seek to reduce Islam to soundbites and statements like, “these people are ruining our nation with their ideas of tolerance” and “women should stay in the home to take care of the children.” These are statements from Habib Syech, but they do not represent the full picture of either Salafi conceptions or the way these speech-acts move within the spaces of the everyday. Static statements, outside of their smelly

context, are meaningless. This becomes additionally complicated when we look at the transition of media headlines from the Western media. They have moved from, “From Indonesia, a Muslim challenge to the ideology of the Islamic State”⁷⁴ to “Indonesia’s courts have opened the door to fear and religious extremism.”⁷⁵ Habib Syech’s disavowal of liberal understandings of tolerance and his mission to Islamize nation-states are not indications of the rising tide of conservatism or of his definitive position as a Salafi. The smelly ambiguity that allows him to appeal to NU, Muhammadiyah, FPI, and Shia Islamic sensibilities while yet also making normative claims challenges the binary of ambiguity versus normativity. Simple characterizations for the sake of representation ignores the ambiguity of everyday experiences of Muslims in Indonesia and elsewhere. Ambiguity and normativity are both a part of what it means to be a participant at these events of *selawat*. In determining how to represent Muslims, we must be more attuned to the ingenious magic that allows for types of ambiguity and the reiteration of norms to coexist.

How, then, are we to write and present the everyday lives of our interlocutors, take the political stakes of representing Islam in the contemporary world seriously, and engage in ethical advocacy for our often misrepresented subjects? Perhaps this goal is impossible; yet are these not the demands of an anthropology of Islam in the contemporary age? Nancy Scheper-Hughes’ “barefoot’ anthropology,” which seeks to collude “with the powerless to identify their needs against the interests of the bourgeoisie institution: the university, the hospital, the factory,” is helpful in cultivating ethnographic sensibilities attuned to these various demands placed on the field of inquiry.⁷⁶

Although representation is always already mediated by the observer, abandoning the “thick description” of the smells of the field for singular characterizations or reducing Islamic existence simply to ambiguity is dangerous to the representation of those we study and for grappling with the way in which Islam is “truly” operating on the ground. I could never fully escape, remain on the outside, or disavow the whiffs of *baraka* that drifted in and out of my life both in and outside of the field. Advocacy here does not emerge as a conscious choice to stand with my interlocutors but a demand that sticks to my clothes like the smell of agarwood.

Endnotes

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11. Micheal de Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).
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16. *Baraka* as a gift is distinct from how Marcel Mauss conceives of it in *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* and Mauss and Hubert in *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions*. *Baraka* does not demand reciprocation in the same way that the *hau* of the Maussian gift does. This is a working definition, which I am developing further in my dissertation.
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18. For reference to the mixing of the spiritual and economic in *baraka*, see Abdellah Hammoudi, *A Season in Mecca: Narrative of a Pilgrimage*, trans. Pascale Ghazaleh (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 82.
19. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), xix.
20. de Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun*, 33.
21. Names have been changes to protect privacy.
22. Nahdlatul Ulama has around 50 million followers. See Saiful Mujani and R. William Liddle, "Politics, Islam, and Public Opinion," *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 1 (2004): 111.
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65. See, for example, Westermarck, *The Moorish Conception of Holiness (baraka)*; Werbner and Basu, *Embodying Charisma*; von Denffer, "Baraka as Basic Concept"; Geertz, *Islam Observed*.
66. Von Denffer. "Baraka as Basic Concept," 169.
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69. *Ibid.*, 34.
70. *Ibid.*
71. *Ibid.*, 32-34.
72. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 35-36.

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