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INTRODUCTION

Cultivating Islam

PEKALONGAN, Central Java, 4 August 2012. It was just after 9:00 p.m. when a middle-aged Javanese man appeared at the house of Indonesia's most prominent Sufi master, Habib Muhammad Luthfi b. Ali Bin Yahya (b. 1947).¹ Dressed in a green checkered sarong and shabby cream long-sleeved shirt, the man looked as if he had traveled a great distance. Later I learned that his name was Suryo. As he entered the brightly lit reception chamber, Suryo saw the Sufi master seated solemnly in an armchair surrounded by his disciples, all of whom were sitting on the rug-covered floor. A disciple was reciting the chapter on ritual ablution from the *Fath al-bārī*, a multivolume fifteenth-century commentary of the sayings and acts of the Prophet Muḥammad (*ḥadīth*).² Realizing that a class was in session, Suryo quickly took his seat among the disciples. Moments later, Habib Luthfi gave a signal to the reciter to stop. He then talked for thirty minutes, describing to his audience in Indonesian mixed with Javanese how the Prophet Muḥammad performed the ablution, while enacting it through bodily gestures. The disciples eagerly watched their master's reenactment of a Prophetic practice. Habib Luthfi told his disciples that he learned how to perform ablution in accordance with the Prophetic precedent not only from reading textual accounts but also from witnessing his teachers. "Textual descriptions of a Prophetic act may be perplexing," he explained, "which is why we need to supplement our textual reading with direct witnessing of the act being performed by someone connected to the Prophet." Most disciples were busy observing Habib Luthfi and taking notes. Suryo, however, did not seem to be interested. His eyes were fixated on the blue octagonal figures of the Afghan rug on which he was sitting.

Shortly after Habib Luthfi dismissed the class, Suryo stood up and approached the Sufi master. He told the *habib* that he had traveled from South Sumatra. Habib Luthfi smiled and thanked Suryo for making the long journey. Much to everyone's surprise, Suryo informed the *habib* that the Prophet Muḥammad had directly appointed him as the Mahdi—that is, the prophesied eschatological redeemer who will lead Muslims prior to the Day of Judgment

and restore Prophetic teachings. He claimed that the Prophet had instructed him to meet Habib Luthfi and demand his allegiance:

I am giving Habib twenty-four hours to consider. If you and your *jamā'a* [followers, congregation] pledge your allegiance to me, then you will all attain salvation. But if you choose to ignore my warning, then you will all be destroyed together with all the evils of this world. Remember Habib, I speak on behalf of the Prophet Muḥammad.

The disciples burst into laughter and began to ridicule Suryo. Habib Luthfi told them to keep quiet and put his arm around Suryo. In an avuncular manner, the *habib* asked Suryo a series of questions unrelated to the latter's eschatological claims. "How is the family?" he asked. "Are they well?" . . . Are you in need of money? . . . What has disappointed you? . . . Is there anything I can help you with?" Realizing that Habib Luthfi was not taking his demand seriously, Suryo's face turned red in anger. He stood up and gave the *habib* a piece of paper with his cell phone number on it. In a stern voice, Suryo repeated his warning: "Habib, I am only giving you twenty-four hours to join the genuine people of the *sunna* and the *jamā'a* [*ahlu sunnah wal jama'ah yang sejati*]." This time, Habib Luthfi chose to completely ignore him. He turned his face away from Suryo and lit a cigarette as the disciples resumed their giggles. Without saying anything, Suryo left the house. He was never seen again.

The brief encounter between Habib Luthfi and Suryo encapsulates the central concern of this book: Islamic religious authorities and their roles in cultivating communities of Muslims that revolve around Prophetic teachings, which can nevertheless vary widely from one another. Both Habib Luthfi and Suryo claim connections to the Prophet and deploy such claims to constitute a religious community. But, whereas Habib Luthfi has been able to seamlessly transmit Prophetic teachings to his disciples without much effort, Suryo was perceived as an eccentric and became an object of ridicule. While a study of "eccentric subjects" can indeed shed light on sites and mechanisms of exclusion, creativity, and struggle beyond dominant categories and discourses, this book is not about Suryo.³ It is about Habib Luthfi and other Muslim saints and scholars who through arduous labor have succeeded in cultivating communities that can serve as sites for the transmission and social realization of Prophetic teachings.⁴ Such actors articulate specific and oftentimes contending visions of the *sunna*—that is, the normative teachings and practices of the Prophet Muḥammad. Consisting of the words, actions, and habits of the Prophet, Muslims posit the *sunna* as the concrete elucidation of divine revelations enshrined in the Qur'ān, from dress codes and performance of worship to rules for war. While the Qur'ān does not contain most of the specific theological, legal, and ethical teachings that make up Islamic norms, it repeatedly

commands Muslims to “obey God and His Prophet” (Q. 8:1) and pronounces Muḥammad as “a most goodly example” (Q. 33:21). In doing so, the Qur’ān posits the Prophet’s life as “the lens through which the holy book is interpreted and understood.”⁵ Together with the Qur’ān, Muslims regard the *sunna* as a foundational source of Islamic theology, law, mysticism, and ethics.

The *sunna*, however, was never written down during the Prophet’s life. Entextualization and compilation of reports that describe the *sunna*—known as *ḥadīths* (Ar. pl. *aḥādīth*)—occurred “over a period of decades and even centuries” after the Prophet’s death and, as such, they “are not in themselves contemporary historical documentation of what Muḥammad said and did.”⁶ As a result, Muslims have never agreed on the specific content of the *sunna*, even when they all recognize its authority as one of the religion’s foundational sources. Different actors claim to speak on behalf of the Prophet by revealing connections to the Prophetic past in the hope of borrowing the authority of the *sunna*. They reconstruct the Prophetic past using various means to delimit the *sunna* in response to distinct social challenges that they confronted in their own localities and historical moments. Consequently, the questions of what can be regarded as *sunna* and who can articulate it lie at the heart of the historical diversification of Islam. Attempts to address these questions have generated a high-stakes competition of unstable claims among Muslim scholars, saints, and leaders and the communities they cultivate. At the broadest level, this book presents a polyphonic story of how the *sunna* becomes rooted in and modulated by distinct sociocultural realities. It argues that the abiding issues of translation, mobilization, collaboration, competition, and conflict are the very dynamics that continue to give the *sunna*—and, hence, Islam—its particular content and force. At stake is the fundamental point that there is no one common, global Islamic community, or *umma*. Instead, there have always been, historically, many communities, each revolving around a different articulation of the *sunna*.

Owing to the intervention of Talal Asad, anthropologists have come to recognize Islam as a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the scriptures and to the changing forms of social practice.⁷ In contrast to these works, this book does not begin by asking how Muslims draw on textual traditions to inform social practices. Instead, it departs from the notion of a vanished *foundational past*, as opposed to existing foundational texts.⁸ Temporal estrangement from the Prophetic past necessitates the labor of connecting to, along with reconstructing and representing, that past as a model, or *sunna*, to others. Such labors involve authenticating transmitted reports and evaluating inherited practices. In the religion’s formative period, they even include the work of delineating the boundary between Divine and Prophetic speech.⁹ These labors are historically, geographically, and culturally situated. Concurrently, as an ideological and narrative product, time itself is constantly being

made and remade, generating multiple constructions of time that add layers of complexity and diversity in how Muslims comprehend the Prophetic past from a particular present and think about their relationship to it.¹⁰ The present on which these labors occur serves as the ground that modulates the past in the attempt to find *not* what is authentically Islamic, but rather what is essential to Islam for that very present and future. The concern with essence, as Asad reminds us, is not necessarily to be equated with a concern with authenticity, and what is essential in a religion, in turn, is not neutrally determinable because it is subject to agonistic and antagonistic arguments.¹¹ The reconstructions and representations of the Prophetic past by different actors may thus look dissimilar from one another. Such dynamics diversify and particularize the *sunna*. They generate a variety of Islamic texts, practices, and institutions that engender diverse forms of religious authority, from caliph and jurist to charismatic saint, holy warrior, and Sufi master, each claiming to connect Muslims to their foundational past.

To be taken as authoritative, a connection to the Prophetic past needs to be recognized by others. Authority, as Hannah Arendt explains, is a hierarchical relationship that connects a group of people with a past that they recognize to be foundational, thereby endowing those in authority with the capacity to transmit and transform that past into examples for the present.¹² Authority “rests neither on common reason nor on the power of the one who commands,” but on the recognition of the hierarchy deemed by all parties involved to be right and legitimate.¹³ Arendt’s definition of authority is helpful to think with for the present purpose of comprehending Islamic religious authority, as it highlights three constitutive elements that make up authority. These are the notion of and connection to a temporal foundation, the capacity to transform that foundation into examples, and the ability to effect obedience without coercion. The authority of Islamic religious leaders, this book argues, is premised on the recognition of their connection to the Prophetic past and hinges on a hierarchical relationship that allows them to articulate Prophetic teachings for others without resorting to coercion. This, in turn, suggests that the formation of authority demands ongoing labors of (re)producing and maintaining such a relationship. A relationship is an achievement, an outcome of contingent and precarious labor, and not a given. The labor cannot stop if the relationship is to endure and develop into a durable community.

Pushing back against Weberian notions of “charisma” and “routinization” that have dominated studies of Islamic religious authority, this book uncovers the centrality and contingency of labor in the formation and maintenance of religious authority and community, including those authorities that have frequently been described as charismatic.¹⁴ While the notion of charisma may perhaps be useful when considering the founding of a religious tradition, it is

of limited utility when it is deployed to comprehend postfoundational religious authority. Instead, the approach I develop here seeks to destabilize religious authority by uncovering the networks and relationalities that simultaneously constitute and jeopardize authority, while highlighting the centrality of labor. My use of the term “labor” owes, once again, to Arendt, who defines it as a form of making that is different from “work.” If work denotes the making of finished products or economic production, labor refers to the ongoing and recurring life-reproducing activities characteristic of farm or household that do not necessarily produce distinct or independent objects.¹⁵ Arendt’s notion of labor is particularly useful to think with when comprehending the formation and maintenance of religious authority and community because it “undermines any clear distinction between production and action” and “locates itself firmly in the sphere of the ordinary.”¹⁶ Concurrently, it allows us to think about outcomes that are internal to the labor itself, like mastery, virtuosity, and excellence in performing the labor.¹⁷

By focusing on the networks, relationalities, and labor that make up religious authority and community this book takes *politics* and *infrastructure* into serious consideration. Politics is central because the labor of cultivating community tends to take place in competitive social terrains where other Islamic communities have come to be formed by different religious leaders claiming alternative connections to the Prophetic past. Cultivating community also occurs in a landscape where “nonreligious” social formations, including states (whether precolonial, colonial, or postcolonial) and other structures of power, concurrently take shape, thereby generating not only complex overlaps and synergies but also conflicts and contestations. As a result, what are commonly considered “religious” and “secular” domains of life are, in reality, variously articulated. How these articulations are formed and regulated, and what happens when they are altered, are questions for anthropological and historical inquiries.¹⁸ Equally important to the politics of religious authority is the question of infrastructure. Cultivating an Islamic community demands infrastructure that connects religious leaders to the foundational past and helps solidify their relationship with their followers, thereby affording them the ability to articulate that past as *sunna* for others. While infrastructures make transmission possible, they also work to “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or elements they are supposed to carry.”¹⁹ This entails the need to think about how varying infrastructures shape divergent contours of relationship that link religious leaders to their followers and open up distinct articulatory possibilities.

In illustrating these general arguments, the book traces the movement and labor of Bā ‘Alawī saints and scholars from the Ḥaḍramawt valley of Yemen to Java, Indonesia, from the eighteenth century to the present day. Claiming descent from the Prophet Muḥammad, the Bā ‘Alawīs have for long migrated to

Southeast Asia from the Ḥaḍramawt. These mobile actors traversed complex cultural fields, and built channels for the transmission of Prophetic teachings and their social realization as *sunna*. They competed with one another as well as with other actors belonging to different Islamic lineages and intellectual genealogies. Following these vectors of transmission accentuates the ways in which these actors have been caught up in local issues of translation and mobilization in their attempt to articulate the *sunna* and cultivate community without ever having the capacity to guarantee success or realize their moral visions. To a large extent, however, the Bā ‘Alawīs have succeeded in maintaining eminence among local populations and becoming recognized as leading Islamic authorities, although there are also less successful cases, as will be shown in this book.²⁰ Thus at the most specific level, this book seeks to capture the ways through which Habib Luthfi, and other historical and contemporary Bā ‘Alawī saints and scholars like him, have been able to become recognized as religious authorities, as living connectors to the Prophetic past. By following these mobile actors, the book traces the movement of Islam between two regions that have been commonly posited to be “peripheral.” It demonstrates how Islam does not simply radiate from the “central lands,” but instead is perpetually formed in between heterogeneous cultures. In adopting a transregional perspective, the book shows close up how Arabic and Javanese elements and people articulate within the same religion. Such a cross-cultural aspect of world religion is seldom noted but is of fundamental importance in developing a more nuanced and grounded way of understanding the diversification of Islam, one that attends to the politics, infrastructure, and labor that engender different forms of religious authority.

The *Sunna* and the Community

“As Indonesian Muslims, we should know how to plant coconuts, and not date palms.” Habib Luthfi uttered these words in front of thousands of disciples and followers who flocked to his congregational center to hear the Sufi master’s monthly sermon. Upon hearing these words, the crowd began to cheer and clap with excitement. I remember asking myself why a simple statement about the cultivation of dates and coconuts electrified the audience. In fact, what is the relationship between Islam or being Muslim and the cultivation of dates or coconuts? To make sense of Habib Luthfi’s statement and the outburst of enthusiasm that followed, we need to consider the resonances evoked by both date and coconut palms for contemporary Indonesians.

Date palms evoke exotic images of the Arabian physical landscape, perceived by many Indonesian Muslims to be the cradle of religious authenticity. Such images are mediated by, among others, the producers of popular culture

who assemble visual imageries of barren desert dotted with oases and date palms for Islamic television programs. Television documentary series, like the highly rated *Jejak Rasul* (Footsteps of the prophets), trace the sacred history of Islam while reproducing imageries of Arabian desert as mythic chronotopes of religious authenticity, sincerity, and piety. Desert scenes, complete with images of camel caravans and date palms, are consistently reproduced as stage sets for Islamic musical performances. During the Islamic holy month of Ramaḍān, high-end malls in Indonesian urban centers feature seasonal displays of desert scenes with effigies of camels and date palms, while employees dressing up in Bedouin garb greet passersby with the Arabic greeting *ahlan wa sahlan* (figure 1.1).

The image of coconut palms, on the other hand, conjures a panoramic picture of captivating congeries of tropical islands that make up the vast Indonesian Archipelago. Such imageries have been immortalized by, among others, the legendary nationalist composer Ismail Marzuki (d. 1958) in his “Rayuan Pulau Kelapa” (The allure of the coconut islands). Indonesian children are taught to sing the patriotic song in school, while every evening, television channels and radio stations play it as their closedown. The Indonesian boy scout movement, a requisite component of the public school system, uses the image of a germinating coconut seed as its emblem. The official explanation of the symbol notes that a coconut seed represents continuity, versatility, and rootedness in the land.

When heard alongside the contemporary salience of date and coconut palms, Habib Luthfi’s statement sounds like a critique of those who attempt to transplant what they take to be a more authentic articulation of Islam from Arabia to Indonesia. From numerous conversations with the *habib*’s followers, I got the sense that many were appalled by some of their compatriots who prefer to speak like an Arab (without knowing the language), dress like an Arab, and idealize Islam in Arabia while criticizing local customs. As one of my interlocutors said, “if Habib Luthfi, who is an Arab and a descendant of the Prophet endorses *Islam Jawa* [Javanese Islam], then why would the Javanese Gatot change his name to Khathtat and start dressing up like an Arab?” The man was referring to Muhammad al-Khathtat—the chairman of the hard-line Islamic Nation Forum—whose real name, Gatot, is a common Javanese name derived from Gatotkacha, one of the protagonists of the Hindu epic Mahabharata. During my fieldwork, I have repeatedly heard similar jokes and criticism. Indeed, Habib Luthfi’s popularity among Javanese Muslims stems from, among other things, his Javanese orientation and disposition, his ability to deliver sermons in refined Javanese, and his vast knowledge of Javanese history and mythology. For that reason Habib Luthfi is often characterized as *Arab tapi njawani* (a Javanized Arab).



FIGURE 1.1 Ramaḍān displays at a Jakarta high-end mall. (Photo by the author)

Indonesian media have often portrayed Habib Luthfi as a proponent of *Pribumisasi Islam* (indigenization of Islam).²¹ The term is often used to describe a number of different intellectual and cultural projects that aim to arrive at a functioning synthesis between what is taken to be a foreign religion and a local culture. *Pribumisasi Islam* emerged from various discussions, debates, and conferences held by several Indonesian Muslim scholars, thinkers, and activists.²² It took shape as a response to multifarious, and often conflictual, processes and itineraries that are often lumped together under the term *Arabisasi* (Arabization). One of its leading proponents, the late Muslim scholar turned Indonesia's fourth president, Abdurrahman Wahid (d. 2009), defined *Pribumisasi Islam*:

as neither Javanization [*Jawanisasi*] nor syncretization. *Pribumisasi Islam* is merely to take local necessities into account in formulating religious law, without having to alter the construct of the laws themselves. It is not an attempt to put aside [religious] norms for the sake of culture, but simply to ensure that those norms accommodate the necessities of culture by using the opportunity provided by variations in understanding the texts.²³

Since its initial emergence in the 1980s, *Pribumisasi Islam* has morphed into different forms, the most recent of which is an essentialized notion of *Islam Nusantara* (Archipelagic Islam—i.e., of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago) posited as antithetical to an analogously essentialized *Islam Arab* (Arab Islam) and presented—in the words of one Indonesian scholar—as “a promising response to religious intolerance and radicalism.”²⁴ One cannot help but notice how the opposition between a positive and humane Archipelagic Islam and an intolerant and turbulent Arab Islam resonates with an old colonial juxtaposition of “good Muslim” and “bad Muslim.”²⁵ This colonial framing resurfaced as a key diction in the rhetoric of the US-led War on Terror, and has now been adopted by the Muslims themselves.²⁶

Ongoing debates on *Pribumisasi Islam* have generated essentialized terms like Arab Islam, Indonesian Islam, and Javanese Islam, all of which carry strong ideological force in contemporary Indonesia. As ideological products, these terms certainly deserve careful study.²⁷ One should refrain, however, from reproducing such terms as analytic categories to help us comprehend Islam as a sociological reality in contemporary Indonesia, or in any other place for that matter. The underlying problem with such terms or with the notion of indigenization lies in its assumption of the existence of, or possibility to demarcate, a universalized and acultural Islam that can integrate into different cultures. Wahid's aforementioned essay, to give one example, begins with this very assumption:

Religion (Islam) and culture are independent, although they are often interrelated. . . . Religion (Islam) is based on revelation and has its own norms. Owing to its normativity, religion tends to be permanent. Culture, on the other hand, is man-made and for that reason subject to evolution and fluctuation in accordance to historical development. This difference, however, does not foreclose the possibility for religious life to manifest in cultural forms.²⁸

Note how Wahid presupposes the existence of a universal and acultural Islam. Such an Islam is usually posited in a legalistic framework, thereby giving the impression that law itself is not a cultural process.²⁹ An assumption of the existence of an acultural Islam is also shared by proponents of Salafism and other more literalist readings of Islam, and has fueled their zeal for purifying the religion from what they see as its cultural accretions.³⁰ It is indeed interesting to note the resonance between such an assumption and what Wendy Brown has identified as liberalism's conceit regarding the universality of its basic principles, which are assumed to operate independently of politics and culture, rendering culture extrinsic to—or as something that can be “entered” and “exited”—and not constitutive of such principles.³¹

So what analytic tools, then, can one adopt to make sense of Islam as a sociological reality without perceiving it as independent of the politics, cultures, infrastructure, and labors that produce it? Historians have increasingly come to deploy terms like *hybridity*, *translation*, and *transculturation* to characterize the historical encounters between Muslims and other cultures or religious traditions.³² For example, Devin DeWeese's work on the Islamization of the Golden Horde describes how elements of Islamic religious tradition often personified by saintly figures displaced the Inner Asian conception of the First Man/Communal Founder, allowing local groups to identify them as their communal ancestors. This initial recognition set in motion a gradual and seamless transformative process that was understood as both Islamic and native.³³ Zvi Ben-Dor Benite's and Kristian Petersen's works on Islam in late imperial China point to how Islamic knowledge was framed in Confucian paradigm, generating the production of Islamic literary works, known collectively as the *Han Kitab*, that envision a Chinese way of being Muslim and a Muslim way of being Chinese.³⁴ Rian Thum's historical ethnography of Uyghur Muslims suggests how locally composed hagiographical texts, saintly shrines, and pilgrimage practices historically defined what it meant to be Muslims for the Uyghurs. This religious infrastructure enabled mass participation, generating a shared imagination of Islam as a form of communal belonging that is historically deep (going back to the region's saintly past and,

ultimately, the Prophetic past), locally embedded, and experiential.³⁵ Tony Stewart's work on the Islamization of Bengal illustrates how Muslims reimagined Islamic ideals in "a new literary environment" through modes of translation that look for local "terms of equivalences in order to approximate the ideas they wanted to express."³⁶ This, in turn, enabled them to share commensurate terms with Bengalis of different faiths. Finbarr Barry Flood's work on intercultural and interreligious contacts and transactions in medieval Afghanistan and North India illustrates how practices like architectural borrowing, gift exchange, and circulation of loot translate and simultaneously engender the creation of new cultural forms situated in between exclusively Hindu and Islamic cultural spheres.³⁷

On the whole, these significant works demonstrate how culture and religion ought to be understood as composite products of historical interactions. A term like "syncretism," in turn, is no longer deemed useful considering that all "pure" cultures and religious traditions are outcomes of "intercultural and intracultural transactions."³⁸ In its own way, each of these works has highlighted the need for an analytic approach to Islam that can account for its contextually embedded (re)production. The challenge remains, however, in ensuring that such an approach does not succumb to, or end up reproducing, purportedly neutral dichotomies like global Islam versus local Islam, scriptural versus vernacular, central versus peripheral, or Arab versus Archipelagic. One should be careful of not positing the existence of a culturally purified or abstracted Islamic normativity that interacts with local cultures and religious traditions to produce more complex and culturally bound instantiations of Islam. The problem with notions of Islamization (or indigenization) is that they often assume local or regional Islam as the historical outcome of "Islam + *y*," where *y* points to the various local cultural and religious elements deemed to be different from Islam. But what is Islam in such a case? What are the Islamic ideals or elements of Islamic religious tradition or Islamic knowledge that are understood to have entered into creative transaction with local cultures or religious traditions? If one assumes the existence of a precultural, presynthetic, pretranslation, prehybrid, or pretransculturation Islam, who gets to decide what it is in the first place? To assume that local cultures were previously extrinsic to Islam, and only gradually came to complicate the religion through historical transactions is to miss the culturally situated labor that aligns and modulates the Prophetic past and the community, contingently determines the alignment between the two, and, as a result, produces an *instantiation* of Islam.³⁹ To illustrate this point further, I want to return to Habib Luthfi's agricultural metaphor and explore its analytic potentials. Instead of comprehending the symbolic salience of date and coconut palms among contemporary

Indonesians as I have done, I want to now take both plants and the labor of cultivation literally.

* * *

Date and coconut palms are members of the monophyletic Arecaceae (also known as Palmae) botanical family. Environmental changes brought about a long and slow process of adaptive radiation that diversified a common ancestor into around 200 subdivisions and 2,600 subspecies, exhibiting shared morphological and physiological traits. Among the most extensively cultivated plants, palms have been central to the formation of human sociality in different parts of the world. Towns, villages, and cities emerged around them. Palm cultivation demanded workers who came from different places, and engendered divisions of labor. The trunks and leaves of palms were crucial for creating infrastructure. The timber was a primary component for building the transportation technologies, whether Arabian dhows or Trobriand canoes, that have historically facilitated the expansion of human sociality. At the same time, parts and products of both date and coconut palms were used for ritual purposes.

So here we have a common ancestor whose actuality has long vanished and whose existence can be grasped only virtually and partially by cultivating its botanical descendants. Cultivation, however, involves understanding different climes and topography, as well as mastering various skills and technologies to improve growth, quality, and yield, and develop the plants' resistance to diseases, pests, and environmental stresses. Cultivation is a social formation. It is a project that gathers different actors, materials, and other entities onto a tract of land that needs to be systematically ordered and sown, and in itself is conditioned by climatic and topographical variables. In the process, these disparate elements become entangled with one another, forming an assemblage that revolves around a shared concern. Cultivating dates in a desert valley and planting coconuts in a sandy tropical beach are projects that lead to the emergence and growth of autochthonous but nevertheless monophyletic agricultural fields, although their constitutive elements—like the laborers, the seeds, and the tools—may come from different places. Equally important is the fact that the temporality of an agricultural field is not synchronic precisely because the elements that compose it did not all begin at the same time.

As a sociological reality, Islam is similar to dates and coconuts. Islam is the fruit of an ongoing project of cultivating a living entity. It seeks to cultivate particular characters and traits in living individuals that are deemed to be beneficial for their flourishing and strengthen their resistance to things that stunt their development.⁴⁰ Islam is the outcome of a situated project of constituting

sociality, assembling collectivity, controlling and expanding its field, and delineating its boundaries. The Prophet Muḥammad cultivated a social field, in ways that were similar to but at the same time different from the dominant tribal sociality of his day, by relying on the conceptual and material infrastructure that was available to him.⁴¹ When he died, others continued the labor that he had initiated or cultivated a new field elsewhere. As might be expected, they began to disagree about the proper way to cultivate this expanding social field. Allow me to present a caricatural representation of the historical disagreements during Islam's formative period (and do note their consistent gender):

- MR. A. Let us introduce new cultivation techniques. As we travel and cultivate fields in different environments, we notice that some of the old techniques are no longer suitable for the changing topography. Nevertheless, these innovations are still in line with the Prophet's way. What is important is the act of cultivation, not its technical details!
- MR. B. We in Medina have carefully maintained the field that the Prophet once cultivated. As inhabitants of the Prophet's city, we are most familiar to his way and we know every detail passed down by the locals. Other cultivators elsewhere should follow what we do. We should be the standard.
- MR. C. No one knows the proper way to cultivate the field except for the Prophet's immediate family and descendants! We should recognize them as the genuine cultivators and follow their guidance.
- MR. D. Look at us, we have painstakingly compiled oral reports detailing how the Prophet cultivated his field and gathered them into written anthologies. We even know how he walked and talked, the clothes he wore, and the various objects he possessed.
- MR. E. Let us think carefully about this notion of cultivation. I think what is essential is not the act of cultivating the field. Look at those who claim to be cultivators only to sit on thrones and enjoy worldly power! What is important is how to cultivate ourselves. Only those who have cultivated themselves can cultivate others. Do you know that some of the cultivated ones can even learn directly from the Prophet through visionary experience?
- MR. F. Enough! All this talk about the proper way to cultivate the field is not going to help us. I think from now on we should stick to the reports that Mr. D and his colleagues have compiled. You guys cannot just say that what you are doing is consistent with what the Prophet did. Some of you are even deducing new techniques of cultivation while claiming it to be consistent with the Prophet. In truth, however,

you learn how to cultivate from the Persians and the Byzantines. Show me some authentic reports narrated by trustworthy transmitters! Sorry, folks, the way of the Prophet can be found only in the letters. Indeed, the letters are clear enough if we know the language.

A student of early Islam should be able to recognize which historical actor or group each of these fictional characters represents. Here I am not trying to reconstruct the intellectual and social complexities that made up the first few centuries of Islamic history. To do so would do no justice to the erudition of the historians who have undertaken such a challenge.⁴² My aim is simply to suggest that one way to study Islam as a sociological reality would be to look at it as an outcome of a project of cultivating an ideally growing social field that revolves around and serves as the site for the realization of norms established once upon a time by the Prophet. An emic term that denotes such a social assemblage is *jamā'a*, which literally means a collective, but can also mean a gathering, following, assembly, congregation, or circle of followers. Here I opt for the more common term “community” to denote a *jamā'a*. A *jamā'a* is a concrete, embodied, and organized form of the *umma*, the latter being a Qur'ānic term for a unified community of believers, which used to also include Jews and Christians before becoming a more exclusive collective term for Muslims.⁴³ Historically, however, what was theologically denoted by the term *umma* was none other than a congeries of *jamā'as*. Taking *umma* as a central term risks “theologizing the practical logic symbolized by *jamā'a*.”⁴⁴ This entails that an empirical approach to Islam would be better served by a focus on the notion of *jamā'a*, rather than *umma*.

The norms that an Islamic community revolves around are known as *sunna*. The noun *sunna* is derived from the verb *sanna*, meaning to institute a practice that is emulated by others. Following Mr. F above, today most Muslims use the term exclusively to refer to the deeds, utterances, and spoken approvals of the Prophet Muḥammad as entextualized in the *ḥadīths* (reports of the Prophet's words, actions, or habits transmitted over a period of decades and even centuries) to the extent that both terms have become quasi-synonyms. In the first two Islamic centuries, however, *sunna* was perceived as living, culturally embedded, and cumulative. The term referred to the exemplary practice instituted not only by the Prophet but also by those connected to him and believed to know and embody his teachings, like the Prophet's companions residing in different places.⁴⁵ The sayings and practices of the Prophet were complemented by his successors, whose distinct experiences, characteristics, and memories of the Prophet blend with local cultures to form different regional *sunnas*.⁴⁶ Subsequent development of Islamic legal theory, however, led to the canonization of a methodological framework that delineates the Prophetic

past, as entextualized in the *ḥadīths*, as the exclusive fount of the *sunna*. Entextualization isolated the Prophetic past as “a clearly defined and uniquely normative category,” objectifying it as “an unchanging and authoritative measuring stick” that can circulate across distance and difference.⁴⁷ Those skilled in authenticating and extrapolating the normative implications of *ḥadīths*—like *ḥadīth* verifiers and jurists—emerged as religious authorities. These actors have, in turn, continued to project the *ḥadīths* as the common and readily available transcripts of the *sunna* imbued with scriptural standing and universal significance. As a form of objectification, entextualization of the Prophetic past formed “a text (whether oral or written) that is perceived to remain constant across contexts,” thereby allowing Muslims to imagine an *authentic* Islam even when that very text is the product of a historically and culturally situated labor of reconstructing, selecting, and, in some cases, translating and codifying a no longer objectively available reality.⁴⁸ As text, the *sunna* moves across contexts, allowing Muslims living in different times and places to imagine a shared and disembedded normativity independent of its particular context of production and realizations.

This definition of the *sunna*, however, is just one among several conceptions. Historians of early Islam have shown how the emergence of this scriptural approach to the *sunna* (that posits the *sunna* as stable foundational text) within the developing framework of Islamic law was the result of cultural upheaval and dislocation that followed from the expansion of the Umayyad and Abbasid Empires.⁴⁹ Consequently, such a conception ought to be recognized as merely one among many approaches to the *sunna* that has achieved a paradigmatic status. The *sunna* cannot be reduced to its particular articulation within the framework of Islamic legal tradition, notwithstanding its paradigmatic status. Nor can Islamic religious authority be limited to the figures of the jurists and other textual interpreters, or even to those who engage in prescriptive work.⁵⁰ The older conception of the *sunna* continues to exist, most notably among the Sufis.⁵¹ For the Sufis, a Sufi master is an exemplar (*qudwa*). He is believed by his followers to be connected to the Prophet, has assimilated his characteristics, and actively transmits his teachings. As a result, his personality and conduct, as well as the practices he institutes are considered as *sunna* and normative for his followers. The recognition of the universal regulatory force of the *sunna* is not accompanied by a belief in the uniformity and finality of its content, which may be derived from Prophetic precedents corroborated by *ḥadīths*, but may also include innovations tied to specific contexts and challenges but nonetheless taken to epitomize Prophetic teachings owing to the figure of the Sufi master. In this conception of the *sunna*, the question of what is *essentially* Islamic in and for the present context is more important than what is *authentically* Islamic.

Sociologically, what turns a particular practice into *sunna* is its perceived connection—in whatever shapes or forms—to the Prophetic past, together with its ability to become a precedent. Scholars who compile and disseminate *ḥadīths* can be said to institute *sunna* precisely because they do so not simply for antiquarian reasons but to help facilitate their reenactment. Such works, however, are not sufficient to ensure the social realization of the *ḥadīths* as *sunna*. After all, authentic *ḥadīths* may be compiled in books that nobody reads, let alone acts upon. They may become objects of a scholastic enterprise with limited social consequences. Instituting *sunna* demands that the instituted practice is doable, recognizably connected to the Prophetic past (even if its authenticity is uncertain), comprehensible to others through their particular cultural assumptions, and that it fulfills specific needs. Indeed, it requires a relationship that ties those who institute and those who follow and practice. In other words, the articulation and social realization of the *sunna* require the labor of cultivating a community (*jamāʿa*), in whatever shape, scale, or form, that is meaningfully connected to the Prophetic past.

* * *

The relationship between the *sunna* and the community is one that is not only useful to think about when we analyze Islam as a sociological reality. It is one that is also ideologically central to Muslims. Thus, it is no surprise that 85–90 percent of the world’s Muslim population identify themselves as *ahl al-sunna wa al-jamāʿa* (people of the *sunna* and the *jamāʿa*), or, simply, Sunnī.⁵² Of course this does not mean that Shīʿī Muslims do not subscribe to both the notions of the *sunna* and the *jamāʿa*. They certainly do. The main difference is that for Shīʿī Muslims, Prophetic *sunna* was elaborated and complemented by the *sunnas* of the Prophet’s spiritual and genealogical successors—i.e., the Imams. As all Sunnī communities do, Shīʿī Muslims believe that their communities are genuinely Islamic because they revolve around the *sunna*.⁵³

The question regarding the relationship between the *sunna* and the community became decisive in the first century of Islamic history, in light of several civil wars that divided early Muslims over the issue of legitimate post-Prophetic leadership, and the subsequent consolidation of the Umayyad Caliphate. Under ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 685–705), the Umayyads attempted to pacify several internal revolts under the banner of the *jamāʿa* principle of Muslim unity.⁵⁴ Such a principle was based on a sense of power and unity of the Arab ruling community and sustained by administrative machinery, legal standards, and economic order, most of which drew upon the heritage of the peoples they had conquered.⁵⁵ “Their palaces were decorated

in the usual Hellenistic fashion, the taxes they raised were essentially the same taxes as those raised by the governments before them,” the historian Marshall Hodgson describes the situation.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Hodgson continues, “the notion of the *jamā‘a*, the unity of the community, did not suffice as a comprehensive Islamic ideal, even when it was accepted on the specific point of who should be caliph.”⁵⁷ The question of what an Islamic *jamā‘a* is pertained not only to the notion of the pragmatic political unity as envisaged by the Umayyads. Among those who were perturbed by or consciously opposed to Umayyad’s monopoly of sociopolitical leadership, the notion of *jamā‘a* became intertwined with the notion of the *sunna*.⁵⁸ These actors wanted Islam to be more than merely a badge of the ruling class and expected Islam to carry with it its own self-sufficient norms without any reference to pre-Islamic norms. They concluded that an Islamic community ought to be governed in accordance with the Qur’ān and the *sunna*. Thus, according to Hodgson, “the crux lay in defining the *sunna*”:

What was objected to as contrary to *sunna* was the seemingly arbitrary departure from what Muslim Arabs had expected—or hoped for. The restrictions and indignities for the privileged Arab families which were inseparable from the development of a centralized monarchy were seen as innovations, called *bid‘a*; and the seemingly more liberal days of earlier rulers—especially of the Medina caliphs and of Muḥammad himself—were recalled as models of what all could agree ought to be: as *sunna*. At the same time, it was recognized that the *bid‘a*, the deplored innovation, was not entirely a matter of the rulers; their power and arbitrariness were partly the consequence of the moral laxity and luxurious habits of the Muslims themselves—for it was in these terms that moralizers naturally saw the assimilation of the Arab ruling class into the cultural and social life of the occupied lands. Accordingly, abiding by the *sunna* would mean restoration, for both rulers and Muslims at large, of the norms of the primitive caliphate and (or, among many Shi‘is, only) of Muḥammad’s time; what did not go back to such times was *bid‘a* and ought to be eliminated from Muslim life.⁵⁹

The *sunna* became increasingly seen to be the norms that can differentiate Muslims from other groups—like the conquered population—and their diverse ways and customs; i.e., their *sunnas*. In the eyes of these actors, the proper Islamic *sunna* should also be differentiated from the pre-Islamic Arab *sunna*.⁶⁰ This, in turn, underlined the need to recover Prophetic *sunna* as a norm that an Islamic community could inherit, grow, and embody.

Hodgson’s historical reconstruction of the sociopolitical contestations of the first two centuries of Islam highlights one conceptual point that will be

further developed in this book; namely, that the project of recovering the *sunna* cannot be separated from the labor of imagining and cultivating a community. The two are mutually constitutive. As such, one way to understand Islam as a historical and sociological reality would be to posit it as an outcome of what I call *articulatory labor*—that is, the labor of articulating the *sunna* and the community. Instead of subscribing to any ideological definitions of the *sunna* and the community, however, I propose that we use both terms as analytic categories. Their definitions should not be decided based solely on what particular Muslim scholars or historians have said. Instead, they need to be opened up to historical and ethnographic inquiries. Following Shahab Ahmed, anthropologists and historians should attempt to recuperate for Islam what has been “excommunicated” by Islamic legalistic or theological frameworks and Western scholarships that have followed them.⁶¹ Adopting a capacious understanding of the *sunna* and the community will enable us to rehabilitate a range of ideas, practices, and social formations that have heretofore been seen as situated outside the purview of what has traditionally been defined as Islamic. For the anthropologists and the historians, however, the most pertinent question is not “what is Islam?” Rather, the question ought to revolve around how particular actors become authorized to define and articulate the *sunna* and the community. Thus, going further than Ahmed’s focus on texts and material artifacts, this book attends to the sociological intricacies and material processes that have led to the diversification of Islam. In doing so, it uncovers the competitive and persistently expanding social terrain in and through which the question of “what is Islam?” has been raised, addressed, and contested in socially efficacious ways.

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Like the vanished common ancestor of both date and coconut palms, the *sunna* can be grasped only by retrospective reconstruction of the Prophetic past from the vantage point of a particular present. Reconstruction involves acts of definition, selection, delineation, and comparison, all of which have precipitated endless agonistic and antagonistic debates and disputes down to the present day. Is the *sunna* the embodied practice of the Medinans or of the Prophet’s descendants no matter where they reside? Is the *sunna* limited to what can be deciphered from the *ḥadīth*—i.e., oral and textual reports of the *sunna* with clear chains of transmission to the Prophetic past? Does it include teachings conveyed posthumously by the Prophet through dreams and visions? Can an innovation that purportedly encapsulates the spirit of Prophetic teachings be considered *sunna*? Should the *sunna* be understood and projected as ethics, law, mystical path, or a combination of all?

Every reconstruction of the Prophetic past occurs in a specific *problem-space*—that is, a discursive and argumentative context. Problem-space, as David Scott defines it, is:

an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs. That is to say, what defines this discursive context are not only the particular problems that get posed as problems as such . . . but the particular questions that seem worth asking and the kinds of answers that seem worth having.⁶²

Scott's notion of problem-space is helpful to keep in mind in understanding how different articulations of the *sunna* and the community came to be formed. It pushes us to think about particular articulations of the *sunna* as answers to a set of questions or outcomes of disputes. The concept also helps us uncover the temporal development of the *sunna* in that problem-spaces "alter historically because problems are not timeless and do not have everlasting shapes."⁶³ In a novel historical context, old questions may lose their relevancy and, in turn, the *sunna* that was articulated as a response to those questions may become barren and irrelevant, even when it remains true. The *sunna* may be authentic, but it may no longer be *essential* to a changing problem-space and thus loses its mobilizing steam.

Debates have also emerged around the notion of *jamā'a*, or the community. What is an Islamic—or *sunna*-aligned—community and what form should it take? Is it a caliphate, a sultanate, a post-Westphalian nation-state, or an informal community? Is it simply a momentary prayer gathering that takes shape five times a day in the neighborhood mosque, only to dissipate twenty minutes later? Or is it an enduring social formation like a Sufi order, political party, *madrasa*, or an immediate or extended family? Can the Taliban Emirate of Afghanistan or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria be considered a *jamā'a*? Or does an Islamic community need to literally describe itself as a *sunna*-aligned *jamā'a* like the *Jamā'at ahl al-sunna li-l-da'wa wa-l-jihād* (*Jamā'a* of the people of the *sunna* for preaching and Jihad), otherwise known by its Hausa moniker as Boko Haram? Historians and anthropologists need not choose which of these can be genuinely considered an Islamic community as Muslims have been arguing for centuries over that very question. In saying that all of these different social formations can be considered as diverse figurations of *jamā'a*, I am suggesting the need for a common frame that enables us to analyze these different Islamic social formations, rather than treating each of them as analytically distinct. This common frame can accentuate the labor of articulation that lies behind all of these social formations. It also allows for fruitful comparisons among a Sufi order, a caliphate, a *madrasa*, a Jihadi network, a modern Islamic

association, and a simple Friday prayer congregation, as social formations that have emerged and continue to take shape in different parts of the Muslim world. Such a common frame highlights the possibility for a particular Islamic social formation to develop into another—say, from a Sufi order to an empire—without succumbing to a historicist view that posits some form of social formation as receding with the passing of time.⁶⁴ Such a frame would deter analysts from treating some Islamic social formations as more Islamic and authentic just because they emerged in particular parts of the world, while seeing others as vernaculars. This analytic frame would also permit analysts to see how a specific Islamic social formation can mirror, or even create alliances with, dissimilar sociopolitical formations, including the modern state. Posed as an open category, the notion of *jamā'a*/community can serve these analytic purposes.

Understanding Islam as an outcome of articulatory labor that aligns the *sunna* and the community also opens up another crucial question—namely, what connects or mediates the two and what processes are involved in their articulation. What are these connectors? If they are humans, who are they? Are they scholars, teachers, proselytizers, saints, sultans, or presidents? What kind of authority do they hold? How do they establish and maintain the relationship that allows them to effectively articulate the *sunna* to others? What infrastructure do they employ? Texts, YouTube, Twitter, Zoom? What kind of connection to the Prophetic past do they claim to have and how do they make it evident to others? Connection to the Prophetic past can be established through various means, from bloodline (*nasab*) or Sufi spiritual genealogies (*silsila*) that link an actor to the Prophet, to the mastery of textual sources that contain reports (*ḥadīths*) of the Prophet's sayings and actions.⁶⁵ Others claim connections to the Prophet through visions and dreams, both of which are believed by some Muslims to facilitate interactions between contemporary actors and the spirit of the Prophet.⁶⁶ In the modern era, there are even Muslims who think that the *sunna* is transmittable only through its entextualized forms in the *ḥadīth* collections, thereby excusing them from the necessity of finding a living connector.

The historical and geographic circulation of the *sunna* requires constant work of building, expanding, and maintaining channels that allow for such movements.⁶⁷ Things and ideas do not just flow and circulate. They need channels and avenues, which demand constant maintenance as passages often fill with sediment and debris that required dredging. Islamic religious authorities are actors who have been able to create and sustain such channels, whether the channels linking them to the Prophetic past as the basis of their legitimacy, or those that connect them to their fellow Muslims who, in turn, can recognize their authorities and revolve around them. What we understand as Islamic

religious authorities are therefore those who have taken the role of, and become recognized as, *connectors* between the Prophetic past and their fellow Muslims to the extent that they can effectively articulate and help realize the *sunna*. One does not simply connect the *sunna* and the community because one has authority. Instead, one becomes a religious authority because one is engaged in the labor of articulating the *sunna* and the community, thereby garnering the recognition of those who make up the community.

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Cultivating Islam thus becomes akin to coconut and date cultivation for at least two reasons. First, it is a project of creating a growing social field involving available conceptual and material infrastructure. Secondly, what is contextually sown is something that is taken as being modeled on a common ancestor, while in actuality it becomes a model for reconstructing the vanished common ancestor. Articulating the *sunna* and the community involves mutual calibration. The *sunna*, after all, is the *sunna* only when it becomes a normative standard for others, or when it is pragmatically reproduced in daily life and in concrete interactions that make up the community. In these processes, the role of the connectors is principal. One should, therefore, ask how particular human actors become recognized as connectors. To do so demands serious consideration of the labor that constitutes Islamic religious authority.

Articulation

The triangular relationship between the *sunna*, the connectors, and the community, all of which are mutually and contingently constituted, opens up an alternative way of thinking about the transmission of Islam. Transmission of Islam has been described primarily as a linear process in which prepackaged Islamic teachings—often posited to be distinct from culture—are transmitted, disseminated, and localized or indigenized to the extent that they take root in, merge with, and shape new sociocultural contexts.⁶⁸ Following the actors who formed the vectors of that transmission, however, yields a more grounded perspective that allows us to see transmission as a far more complicated process. Such an approach shows that what we often describe as the transmission of Islam is a sporadic, highly contingent, locally grounded process of social formation that brings together diverse elements into a new assemblage that allows for the Prophetic past to be recalled, represented, and transformed into examples, or *sunna*, for present and future action. The ways in which that past becomes articulated with the present correspond to the changing proclivities of its audience, the shifting problem-space in and through which that

articulation occurs, and the availability of new resources and infrastructure. Far from being a stable product of habits or transgenerational inheritance, a social formation is a fragile achievement. As Bruno Latour reminds us, a social formation is “an association between entities which are in no way recognizable as being social in the ordinary manner, *except* during the brief moment when they are reshuffled together.”⁶⁹ This momentary association transforms and translates the correlated elements so that they can act in unison, facilitate movements and transmission, and mobilize. If a social formation is by definition momentary, the question becomes: what makes some social formations durable and susceptible to growth, while others are liable to contraction and succumb to ephemerality? Posing this question pushes us to think about the different labors and infrastructure—whether conceptual or material—behind any given social formation. It also leads us to the question of politics, not only because social formation involves the matter of leadership through its ability to empower actors differentially, but also because it takes shape in an unequal world filled with multiple intersecting and overlapping social formations, where limited resources—including material resources—limit or shape social processes, and where “the unpredictability of resource accumulation” constantly imposes risk on its capacity to reproduce and endure.⁷⁰

The implications of this shift in analytic perspective are threefold. First, the *sunna* is always local because it is always produced through specific retrospective attempts of connecting to the Prophetic past using different modifying mediums and infrastructure. Secondly, there have always been multiple Islamic social formations, revolving around similar or distinct articulations of the *sunna*, which may compete with one another, forming what the historian Nile Green has called a competitive “religious economy.”⁷¹ This, in turn, underlines the need to move away from the theological notion of *umma* that for long has been imagined as the basic analytic unit of Islamic community, and to shift to its concrete and organized form—i.e., *jamā‘a*/community.⁷² Thirdly, the absence of consistency in the religion’s foundational source is the consequence of social formation as a process that articulates different elements, including the Prophetic past, and simultaneously translates and transforms them. One may argue that this lack of consistency is what enables Islam to be endlessly reproduced in different ways in disparate contexts. Indeed, it is what equipped Islam with the ability to become a world religion, even without the support of global institutional structures.

If every Islamic social formation is a product of *articulatory labor*, then differences among Islamic communities can be explained in terms of articulatory variation. Adopting this point permits us to develop a nonholistic and nonhistoricist reading of Islam and Islamic history, one that portrays the transmission of Islam not as a linear process, but as a discontinuous reproduction of different

Islamic communities, all of which may be interrelated without necessarily forming a whole. To clarify this point, I want to turn to Louis Althusser, whose discussion of articulation is central to the approach I am formulating here. In *Reading Capital* Althusser argues that previous readings of Marx confuse the Marxist concept of historical time with the Hegelian notion of the homogeneous temporal continuity and contemporaneity.⁷³ Such readings reflect Hegel's conception of synchronic and diachronic unity and wholeness, thereby presenting historical time as successions of wholeness, or total synchronicity in a temporal continuum. As a result, historical time tends to be presented as the evolution of different modes of production posited in holistic terms. In contrast, Althusser developed the notion of articulation to conceive of a more complex social totality made up of interrelationships among different modes of production that coexist alongside one another, each having its own historical existence and temporal dynamic, and may come to be conjoined with one another without forming a whole.⁷⁴ Althusser explains that, unlike the Hegelian whole, the Marxist totality is "constituted by a certain type of complexity, the unity of a structured whole containing levels or instances which are distinct and relatively autonomous, and co-exist within this complex structural unity, articulated with one another according to specific determinations."⁷⁵ Althusser seems to point to two articulatory dynamics operating on two levels. The first is articulation that makes up a mode of production, one that combines productive forces and relations of production.⁷⁶ Being an outcome of articulation, each mode of production has its own temporal dynamic and is relatively autonomous, although it may also suffer from internal contradictions that can lead to its disintegration. The second is articulation that makes up a complex totality, one that ties different modes of production without altering their own internal structures, thereby generating contradictions that may eventually result in revolutionary change.⁷⁷ One important implication emerges from Althusser's reading of Marx, one that renders the Marxist theory of history radically antievolutionist. Each mode of production is by definition a combination of elements, which are only notional elements unless they are articulated with one another according to a determinate articulatory mode. Similarly, what we call a totality or whole is also an uneasy, if not contradictory, interrelationship among different modes of production. Consequently, transition from one mode of production to another, and by the same token transition from a totality to the next, should not be understood in terms of continuity or evolution, but as perpetual *reproduction of the combinations* through various articulatory modes. The reproduction of the combination that occurs in each mode of production affects the interrelationship that makes up the social totality. As Étienne Balibar succinctly puts it, Althusser's reading of Marx shifts the central analytic problem of history and the social to the question of articulatory variation.⁷⁸

Subsequently, several scholars have attempted to refine Althusser's conception of articulation. Stuart Hall, for example, critiques Althusser's positing of articulation as a process that produces variation among *invariant* elements.⁷⁹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in their turn, underline how articulation may involve a qualitative transformation of the conjoined parts, in that "their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice."⁸⁰ In their rendering, articulation is an active practice of negotiation pursued by different actors and parties and involves "the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning" among its constitutive and often contradictory parts, thereby allowing the entanglement and possible alignment of meaning and agendas.⁸¹ Such a reconceptualization allows us to underline successful articulation as the outcome of concrete negotiations and contingent labor of human actors that otherwise are not at all apparent, or are even disregarded as systematic delusions, in Althusser's structuralist schema.

Drawing judiciously on these theoretical insights, I propose that the notion of articulatory labor allows us, first of all, to break down the holistic unit of Islam or *umma*, which, after all, is a contradictory ensemble or an imaginary reconstruction that "gives legitimacy to the small group pretending to speak in its name."⁸² Instead, the notion of articulation as developed in this book enables us to focus on divergent itineraries and social and literary networks, as well as varieties of articulatory labors that generate different Islamic *jamā'as*/communities.⁸³ It permits us to conceptualize each Islamic community—even those claiming to speak on behalf of the *umma*—as a locally embedded assemblage made up of a combination of particular elements that are brought together according to a specific articulatory mode. Instead of historical continuity and linear transmission, this approach enables us to think about Islamic history in terms of combinatory variation that (re)produces different forms of Islamic community (or different Islamic modes of production). Each Islamic community is the outcome of articulatory labors that calibrate its diverse constitutive elements. Such labors are concrete and contingent by nature. They may become efficacious in some relational contexts, while failing to do so in others. Nevertheless, some modes of articulatory labor and the forms of authority they engender may become paradigmatic, forming what I call *articulatory paradigm*, which shapes the labors of subsequent generations. Ultimately, positing articulatory labor as a central problematic means maintaining a commitment to the microcontext, even of the biggest world and history-making schemes like religion.

Secondly, positing Islam as an outcome of articulatory labors enables us to see how, despite their differences or even contradictions, distinct Islamic social formations may become articulated with one another. In fact, an Islamic social

formation—like a Sufi order or a modern Islamic association—can create alliances with other similar and dissimilar formations, including the state, by partially fixing meanings despite their pursuance of diverse and often conflicting objectives. The complex and plural social terrains in which articulatory labors take place means that articulations are realizable only momentarily. Nonetheless, when a temporary efficacious alignment takes shape, it may produce results that endure long after the relationship disintegrates. The proliferation of actors, entanglements, and associations, and their attempts to transmit and realize contending *sunnas*, ultimately means that the complete dominance of an Islamic community and the Islamic teachings it instantiates will remain an unachievable aspiration. This pushes us to think about the social life of Islam as a set of exchanges, interactions, conflicts, and perpetual transactions among different communities, thereby avoiding linear models of transmission or historicist explanations of religious development.

Finally, the notion of articulation accentuates how the “religious” may articulate with other domains such as politics, bureaucracy, business, and the military. Recent anthropological works on Islam have turned away from the messiness of social life to study schools, mosques, revivalist groups, and Islamic courts.⁸⁴ These works relegate as peripheral what Samuli Schielke describes as the “complex logic of lived experience”—that is, the multiple and contradictory ideals and aspirations expressed by different actors; the complexity, ambiguity, and openness of everyday lives; and the tension among the local, national, and global connections that actors locate themselves in or are contingently entangled with.⁸⁵ This book suggests that the notion of articulation allows us to think about how an Islamic community in whatever shape or form may become articulated with other social formations, including the state. It accentuates how actors belonging to an Islamic community are constantly in dialogue with other social milieus. This, in turn, enables us to think more critically about areas that cut across the dichotomy of the religious and the secular.

Islam thus stands—sociologically speaking—as an outcome of a particular form of labor, that of articulating the *sunna* and the *jamāʿa*/community.⁸⁶ These two notions have taken different forms and possibilities, even when they share the Prophetic past as a common and foundational reference point. Adopting this approach does not mean that we are back to the notion of multiple Islams that operate in a zero-sum game—that is, positing that one either take Islam as a predefined religion or as a relational ongoing and plural production of meaning. Rather, thinking about Islam through the prism of articulation permits us to identify the concrete invariant dynamics in historically evolving, open configurations, thereby generating diversity of Islamic teachings, practices, communities, and forms of authority.

Narrating Islam

In a notable article, the historian Shahzad Bashir questions the usefulness of the notion of “Islamic history” as a unifying historiographical category. Reviewing the works of Marshall Hodgson, Ira Lapidus, and Jonathan Berkey, Bashir observes how these scholars presume the unity of Islam, despite the presence of data within their works that can attest to the historical reality of Islam “as a fundamentally fractured and conflicted tradition, not susceptible to representation by an internally coherent narrative.”⁸⁷ In Bashir’s view:

The ultimate impetus for the unifying approach comes from commitment to the idea that a religion such as Islam must be a factor of cohesion. . . . [T]hese scholars presuppose that persons professing belief in “Islam” must share a core in common even though there is no shortage of data to suggest that the meanings and implications of such belief can vary radically from context to context . . . [T]his is a theological view of history that invests a particular geographical locality with *longue durée* patterns claimed as eternal constants despite radical change in circumstances.⁸⁸

This unified perspective, Bashir continues, derives from “placing the essence of Islam in a vision of the essentials of a timeless Middle Eastern culture,” thereby “casting Islamic perspectives produced outside the Middle East as being forever derivative on the one hand and encumbered with accretions from ‘other’ cultures on the other.”⁸⁹ Bashir concludes his critique by emphasizing that:

An Islam divided between an essence and additions is made possible by imagining Islamic history as a single timeline that begins in pre-Islamic Middle Eastern religions, consolidates in the Middle East in the “classical” Islamic age, and then eventually flows out from there to other regions to constitute weaker, diluted, or deviant versions.⁹⁰

Bashir’s critique poses a challenge to think about alternative ways of narrating the history of Islam that does not reproduce the tendency to posit the religion as the factor that unites historical differences or one that comprehends Islamic historical geography along a core-periphery model. There is a resonance between the problem that Bashir highlights and that faced by art historians. In art history, Islam has long been posited as “a historicized civilizational category distinct from that of living production.” This, in effect, produces “a universal Islam in a manner that never existed in the absence of the epistemologies of positive classification that aimed to define it.”⁹¹ For Bashir, whose works focus on hagiographical and historiographical texts, the solution lies in “untying the consideration of texts and other materials from the standardized timeline of

Islamic history” and recovering human agency in manufacturing different conceptions of time.⁹²

Building on Bashir’s intervention, this book proposes a narrative approach to Islam that does justice to the religion’s polyphonic reality—one that does not presume Islam to be an explanatory paradigm. Instead, it situates Islam as a sociological product, a contingent achievement that needs to be explained. Rather than taking Islam as a given or positing it as a unifying factor that can explain contending itineraries and social formations, this narrative approach seeks to trace the articulatory processes that produce particular realizations of Islam. It does this by adopting what the Czech novelist Milan Kundera describes as polyphonic narrativity. In music, polyphony is “the *simultaneous* presentation of two or more voices (melodic lines) that are perfectly bound together but still keep their relative independence.”⁹³ Polyphony in the novel, according to Kundera, begins with a unilinear composition, which opens up to rifts in the continuous narration of a story. Take Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, for example, which begins with Quixote’s unilinear travel story. As he travels, Quixote meets other characters, who narrate their own stories, thereby diversifying the novel’s linear framework by introducing different voices and stories that enrich and transform the overall narrative structure of the novel.

Similarly, the narrative of Islam can be fruitfully constructed by taking the actuality and metaphoricity of travel seriously. This narrative begins as a single itinerary, only to encounter forks along the road that lead it in different directions, where it encounters different voices and stories that enrich and transform the overall narrative. While these particular itineraries may constitute the overarching narrative of Islam, such a grand narrative becomes visible only when we take a God’s-eye view, or *panorama*, to use Latour’s term.⁹⁴ Yet, whatever the global and universal picture actors—whether Islamophobes or Pan-Islamists—have attempted to conjure of Islam, some of whom are informed by desires for an expansive wholeness and centrality, such a representation is always assembled, maintained, and sustained in concrete localities through different technological mediations, where it becomes susceptible to political vicissitudes and sociological variabilities.⁹⁵ The reality remains that Islam materializes in divergent ways. Muslims live and will continue to live in differentiated societies. They engage in different genres of discourse, subject to contending language games, linked to multiple contexts of communication and practice, and participate in different practices of world making that often generate tensions among members of the same community as well as among different communities. We therefore need to take seriously Michael Gilson’s proposition that a historical or anthropological approach to Islam should be concerned with “sociological questions of social and cultural variations in very different societies.”⁹⁶ That is, it should attempt to identify “varying relations

of practice, representation, symbol, concept and worldview within the same society and between different societies.”⁹⁷

Rather than pretending that we can offer a panoramic view of Islamic history, historians and anthropologists should limit their work to tracing one itinerary by following the actors who traversed it, while allowing the encounters with other itineraries along the road to complicate it. There is no one single, overarching narrative of Islam apart from these itineraries. No particular itinerary can be raised to a higher level and used to make sense of other itineraries, let alone be used as a unifying paradigm. As Kundera notes, one fundamental principle of polyphonic composition is “the equality of voices: no one voice should dominate, none should serve as mere accompaniment.”⁹⁸ Following the travels of scholars, saints, and leaders and their labor of cultivating diverse Islamic communities is one way of staying true to the polyphony that is Islam. There have always been many Islamic communities, which emerged from encounters between different times, voices, stories, and itineraries. Every narrative of Islam, including the one I am about to tell, is by nature incomplete.

The first part of this book follows a highly influential articulatory paradigm that emerged between the Ḥaḍramawt and Java. Pioneered by a Bā ‘Alawī Sufi scholar, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Alawī al-Ḥaddād (d. 1720), this paradigm began as a labor of articulating the *sunna* for the tribal communities in the Ḥaḍramawt. Chapter 1 observes several pre-Ḥaddāḍian modes of articulatory labor that have enabled the cultivation of different forms of Islamic community with varying scale in Java and the Ḥaḍramawt. Each of these communities revolved around particular figures of authority—whether saints or sultans—and their successors, who were recognized as connectors to the Prophetic past and living embodiments or purveyors of Prophetic teachings. The first chapter thus serves to acquaint readers with the notion of articulatory labor while providing the history behind the emergence of the Ḥaddāḍian paradigm. Chapter 2 focuses on al-Ḥaddād and his attempt to formulate a new mode of articulatory labor that shifts the emphasis of Islam away from the inimitable achievements of living figures to text-based Prophetic teachings accessible to the commoners (*‘awāmm*). The chapter then follows the spread of this paradigm in Java in the early nineteenth century. Chapter 3 looks at the Islamic communities established by Ḥaddāḍian scholars in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Java. While assembled in accordance to the Ḥaddāḍian articulatory paradigm, these communities gradually developed into saintly dynasties. Focusing on the Bā ‘Alawī saintly dynasty of Pekalongan, Central Java, the chapter shows how behind the transformation of a Ḥaddāḍian community into a saintly dynasty is a changing mode of articulatory labor that adjusted the way the *sunna* is imagined and generated a novel form of authority that has remained

influential down to the present day. The first three chapters touch on several topics, including mobility, objectification, purification, colonial encounters, and modernity, each of which deserves its own monograph. My treatment of them here is not meant to be a thorough or definitive demonstration. Instead, my purpose is to accentuate the larger framework that informs the ethnography presented in the second part of the book.

The second part of the book continues the narrative by following the emergence of a growing Islamic community in contemporary Java. This community is cultivated by a Bā 'Alawī scholar who has risen to become Indonesia's leading Sufi master, Habib Luthfi Bin Yahya (b. 1947) of Pekalongan, with whom this introduction begins. Believed by his followers to be a living saint, Habib Luthfi is considered an eminent Islamic authority and his counsel is widely sought not only by his devotees but also by prominent politicians, generals, scholars, and business people. While influenced by the Ḥaddādiān paradigm, the *habib* has sought to transcend this dominant Bā 'Alawī articulatory paradigm by drawing upon and synthesizing different articulatory modes that have been historically present in Indonesia. Chapter 4 follows the biographical becoming of Habib Luthfi. Unlike the scions of the Bā 'Alawī saintly dynasties, Habib Luthfi does not come from an established scholarly or saintly background. Consequently, he had to form new connections and embed himself in established genealogical channels to be recognized as a credible connector to the Prophetic past. The chapter then describes the *habib's* rise to prominence and rivalries with competing religious leaders, including the scion of the saintly dynasty of Pekalongan. Chapter 5 focuses on Habib Luthfi's mode of articulatory labor. It observes how the infrastructure that makes up a Sufi order enables him to create a durable community that centers on the hierarchical relationship between a Sufi master and his disciples. Such a relationship, in turn, allows Habib Luthfi to adjust and augment the *sunna* by introducing new teachings and practices to suit the changing proclivities of his disciples without being perceived as deviating from Prophetic teachings.

The penultimate chapter focuses on Habib Luthfi's relationships with different actors and institutions of the Indonesian state. It observes how different articulatory labors have allowed the *habib* to establish alliances with the state and, in turn, employ the state as an infrastructure of religious authority. These relations enabled him to organize religious events in and through which he performs the labor of articulating the *sunna* to a broader audience, often at the expense of other Muslim leaders. Alliances with the state have also permitted Habib Luthfi to enact consequential interventions on behalf of others. The final chapter observes the *habib's* labor of recovering Indonesia's saintly past. Much of this labor has been devoted to the hagiographical composition of his own little-known and unrecorded forefathers. Such a hagiographical

composition presents Habib Luthfi as a lineal successor of an old, but forgotten, Bā 'Alawī saintly dynasty closely linked to the Ḥaddādiān scholars on the one hand and the Javanese royal dynasty on the other. In Habib Luthfi's hand, hagiography works to articulate historically competing genealogies and itineraries of Islamic transmission discussed in the first part of this book. The convergence of multiple genealogies of Islamic transmission in Habib Luthfi allows him to situate himself as the living terminus of diverse historical itineraries that connect contemporary Java to the Prophetic past. Being an embodiment of several genealogies of authority, in turn, affords the *habib* the possibility to authoritatively nest himself in different Islamic communities in Java and articulate the *sunna* for them, albeit without necessarily determining its success.

The book closes with a short epilogue that discusses the implications of the analytic approach proposed in this book to the way we understand Islam's universality. In attending to the articulatory labor that produces Islam as a social reality, the book critiques the common tendency to equate Islam with a consistent supracultural package of precepts, values, and practices distinct from local particularities. By asserting the existence of a "pure" Islamic tradition, scholars have consistently misrecognized Islam as a premade universal project. In contrast, this book proposes a way of thinking about Islam's universality as a *concrete universality*. This entails that what is universal about Islam is not ideational commonality, but the concrete labor of articulating the *sunna* and the community that has generated doctrinal and practical diversity.

Readers may be struck by the near absence of socioeconomic class and gender as analytic categories in this book. Scholars have drawn attention to the intersection between religious authority and socioeconomic class. To give one example, Richard Bulliet's classic work, *The Patricians of Nishapur*, observes how the power and prestige of medieval Nishapur scholarly elites were derived from land ownership and commerce as much as religious knowledge.⁹⁹ While recognizing the importance that socioeconomic class may play in the formation of religious authority, both the textual sources and the people I work with have drawn my attention to other forms of stratification that have played more critical roles, at least for the actors discussed in this book. This includes a genealogically based system of social stratification among the Ḥaḍramī that differentiates people on the basis of descent, generating a hierarchy of groups beginning with Bā 'Alawī *sayyids* (descendants of the Prophet), the *mashā'ikh* (non-*sayyid* scholarly families), the *qabā'il* (tribesmen), and the *masākin* (unarmed town and city dwellers who cannot trace their descent to a prominent historical figure).¹⁰⁰ Another form of stratification distinguishes people based on knowledge. Shahab Ahmed aptly described it as "a class hierarchy constituted not by material wealth or political

(continued...)

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