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Learning at graves: the living, the dead, and questions of identity in Islamic Java

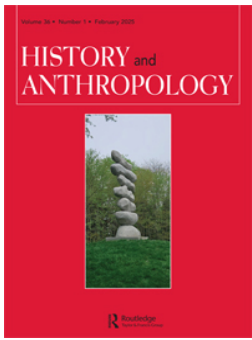
Meyer, V.H.

Citation

Meyer, V. H. (2025). Learning at graves: the living, the dead, and questions of identity in Islamic Java. *History And Anthropology*, 36(3), 497-515. doi:10.1080/02757206.2025.2452450

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



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To cite this article: Verena Meyer (20 Jan 2025): Learning at graves: The living, the dead, and questions of belonging in Islamic Java, History and Anthropology, DOI: [10.1080/02757206.2025.2452450](https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2025.2452450)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2025.2452450>



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Learning at graves: The living, the dead, and questions of belonging in Islamic Java

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ABSTRACT

Ahmad Dahlan (d. 1923) was the founder of Muhammadiyah, a modernist Islamic organization in Indonesia that is often critical of traditionalist practices like grave visitations. Although many traditionalists are likewise critical of the modernist Islam with which Dahlan is associated, some nonetheless visit his grave to pray there, thus seemingly disregarding not only Dahlan's own wishes, but also their own reservations about the modernist movement Muhammadiyah represents. To understand this seeming paradox, I focus on prayers uttered during such pilgrimages and argue that grave visitations allow today's pilgrims to establish ontological, narrative, and ethical relationships with Muslims of the past. As an interface between the past and the present, grave visitations grant access to the imaginal realm and to different temporalities where those who remember forge more authentic ties of identity and ideological belonging that are irreducible to conventional categories of the traditionalist and the modernist Muslim.

KEYWORDS

Indonesia; traditionalism; graves; memory; afterlife

The grave of Ahmad Dahlan, the founder of Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's largest modernist Islamic mass organization, is a small plot, enclosed by flat white stone slabs, no higher than a hand span, and marked by a simple headstone that only lists his name (Figure 1). It is located in Karangkajen, a neighbourhood in South Yogyakarta, the city where he founded his organization in 1912 and lived until his death in 1923. At the time of his death, Muhammadiyah was a small but well-run organization, still mostly based in Central Java but about to expand to all of Indonesia.¹ Contemporary members like to tell the story of his funeral procession, a procession that was so long, several kilometres in fact, that most people never came anywhere near the cemetery. Behind his grave, there is a sign that marks it as the final resting place of a *pahlawan nasional*, a national hero, a status bestowed upon Ahmad Dahlan by the government in 1961. The government, it is said in Muhammadiyah circles, would have liked to build a larger monument to commemorate Ahmad Dahlan's memory, but the community would not have it: it was not advisable to act as though the grave was a special place. All the graves around Ahmad Dahlan's

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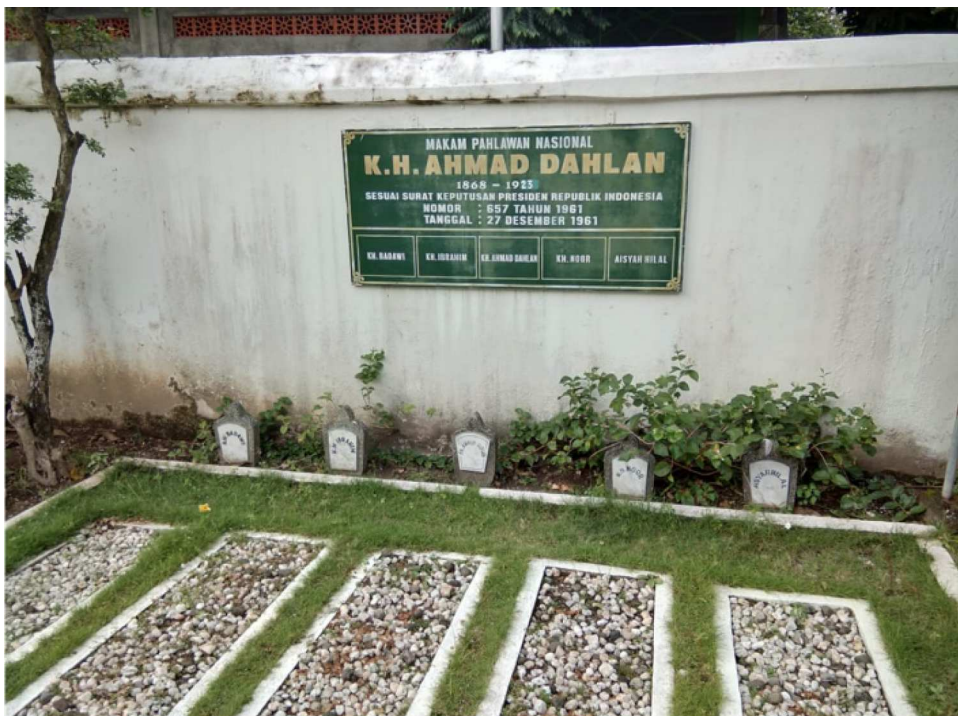


Figure 1. The grave of Ahmad Dahlan. Photograph courtesy of Diah Puspita.

look just like his. Flower petals strewn on the graves or books with prayers for the dead, common at many other Javanese graveyards, are absent. ‘Creepy’ (l. *seram*) my traditionalist interlocutors would call it, shuddering at the thought of the sterile, silent cemetery. ‘Clean’ (l. *bersih*) is how modernists have described it to me, with some pride in the graveyard’s simplicity that shows that Muhammadiyah has other priorities than building and maintaining fancy graves; and that also discourages grave visitations, which, for many modernists, always harbour dangers of *shirk*, or idolatry.² Like many other Islamic modernists globally, Muhammadiyah members reject efforts to connect to the special power of the dead in hopes of blessings because such acts deny the finality of death. Graves are places like any other. The dead are gone and inaccessible for the living.

Yet not everybody shares this assessment, and pilgrims do come – albeit just a few, and often with some trepidation. Only a mile or so away from the grave is Krapyak, a prestigious *pesantren* or traditionalist school affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia’s largest traditionalist Islamic mass organization. The school was founded in 1910 by the Qur’an scholar Kyai Haji Muhammad Munawwir.³ Students at Krapyak often come over to Karangakjen to visit and pray at Ahmad Dahlan’s grave, a practice known around the Islamic world by the Arabic term *ziarah*. Their *ziarah* to Ahmad Dahlan’s grave is surprising for two reasons: First, NU traditionalists are often very critical of, and sometimes downright ill-disposed toward, Muhammadiyah modernists. The foundation of NU in 1926 had the explicit intent of protecting traditionalist interests and the authority of their ulama vis-à-vis the increasing socio-political acumen of the Islamic modernism of Muhammadiyah and other organizations,⁴ and this sense of a modernist threat has

persisted within NU until today. For many traditionalist visitors of Ahmad Dahlan's grave, going to Karangjajen feels like going to hostile territory, and the graveyard itself is too sterile, too quiet – in short, too creepy. And second, Muhammadiyah modernists, including reportedly Ahmad Dahlan himself, have rejected grave visitations as superfluous or even un-Islamic. Why pay respect to the grave of a figure who is apparently at odds with their own values? And why pay respect to him by visiting him when he himself did not want to be visited?

Over the last few decades, scholarship on Indonesian Islam has shown that the conventional boundaries between modernist and traditionalist Islam, and hence between Muhammadiyah and NU, have become increasingly porous (Feener 1998; Howell 2001, 2010, 2012; Nakamura 2012; Sila 2020). In fact, however, the situation is more complex: Even as some contrasts in thought and practice have softened, there have been equally strong countercurrents to construct new boundaries and new definitions of what it means to be a modernist or a traditionalist. Traditionalist pilgrimage to Ahmad Dahlan's grave may look like an example of increasingly porous organizational boundaries. Yet, as I will argue, traditionalist *ziarah* to Muhammadiyah's founder redefines traditionalism as a heritage constituted through a web of relations between the living in the dead that is conceptualized in terms of a Javanese interpretation of the imaginal vocabulary Shahab Ahmed recognized in the Balkans-to-Bengal complex.⁵

In this article, I draw on ethnographic field research at Krapyak, the narrative resources of Javanese literature, and classical Islamic thought to investigate the politics of the imaginative in my traditionalist interlocutors' memory of a particular figure. Specifically, I focus on the grave as an interface between the past and the present, a point of access to the imaginal realm where those who remember forge more authentic ties of identity and belonging. I focus on two interrelated aspects. The first pertains to Javanese understandings of temporality, and of the relation between the past and present in memory: the past, when remembered, loses its pastness and becomes a living present and prophetic script for the future. The second relates to the ethics underlying this temporal relation: drawing on the classical Islamic sources my interlocutors have used when explaining their relation with the dead to me, and in conversation with other anthropologists of Islam including Amira Mittermaier (2011, 2019) and Anand Taneja (2017), I conceptualize memory practices at graves as a reciprocal relation challenging binary perspectives that separate the living from the dead or posit a morally and ontologically autonomous subject. This traditionalist identity, I then argue, is rooted in these temporal and ethical relations and is thus irreducible to individual choice. These relations can reinterpret or even override the decisions of an individual, even a very esteemed teacher such as Ahmad Dahlan.

Temporality: the future of the dead in the present of the living

To begin answering the question of what it means for traditionalists to remember, I turn to a grave that is much more typical for traditionalists than Ahmad Dahlan's: the grave of Mbah Munawwir, Krapyak's founder, just two short miles West of Dahlan's grave. In spite of their geographic proximity, the two cemeteries seem worlds apart. The Dongkelan graveyard is nowhere near as tidy as the one in Karangjajen. Here, all graves are different from one another. Mbah Munawwir's, and the graves of his family members,

have larger headstones than most others, are shrouded in green cloth, and are usually covered in fresh flowers. A roofed platform offers pilgrims a place to comfortably sit and pray, sheltered from the heat of the sun or the rain. They can help themselves to dog-eared prayer books that are sitting on a bent bookshelf, if they are not currently in use, which may well be the case on a busy day. In particular in the month of Ruwah, the Javanese name for the month of Sha‘bān in the Islamic calendar, the Dongkelan graveyard, like the cemeteries hosting other great Javanese ulama, are teeming with pilgrims. Chartered buses park in the narrow streets around Mbah Munawwir’s grave as people spill out of the doors. Many of the pilgrims are part of long-standing prayer groups in their hometowns, *majelis tahlil* or *majelis dhikr*, who routinely visit several graves each Ruwah, selecting a different route each year.⁶ They may be from towns a few hours away from Yogyakarta, and they often look quite tired – many groups are on the road for several days and sleep on the bus, if they manage to sleep at all. Upon arriving, the pilgrims walk in a single file across the cemetery to the platform next to Mbah Munawwir’s grave, sit down, and one designated person leads them in prayer (Figure 2). On a busy day in Ruwah, two or three groups may be waiting for their turn as another group is praying.

Over the last decade, visiting local graves of past ulama has experienced a boom among traditionalist Muslims in Java.⁷ This boom has correlated with NU’s rebranding of their organization’s traditionalism as Islam Nusantara, the Islamic heritage of the Malay-Indonesian world. More specifically, Islam Nusantara is the Islam that has been practiced in the area since the *wali sanga*, the nine saints who, according to tradition, brought Islam to the area by skilfully using local custom and knowledge as a vehicle to



Figure 2. Visitors praying at Mbah Munawwir’s grave. Photograph by the author.

convert people (see Hoesterey 2018; Slama 2020). Since its beginnings in 1926, NU has defended the body of scholars or ulama, past and present, as indispensable in transmitting Islamic teachings. Through their adaptation of the language of Islam Nusantara and the stories of the nine saints, NU has been provided with a narrative model to project their traditionalist lineages back to the moment when Islam first came to the area. Visiting graves, in this context, is a way to invoke this heritage through the memory of particular figures who were a part of these lineages.

As people waited to pray at Mbah Munawwir's grave, I would often strike up a conversation. Why had they come to Mbah Munawwir's grave? Their answers were fairly uniform: Because he was one of Java's great ulama, one of the pillars of Javanese Islam, and therefore deserving of the respect and prayers of today's Muslims. What did they know about Mbah Munawwir's life? They shrugged. Not very much; and neither did they find that remarkable, let alone embarrassing. They were not an exception: most people I spoke with who came on *ziarah* to his or other graves knew very little or nothing about the stories around the person whose grave they were visiting. They had come to pray for the dead or to receive blessings. What did it matter what specifically it was a person had done?

Ziarah contributes to the cultivation of a shared memory among NU traditionalists, a kind of memory we could define, in the words of Christian Novetzke, as 'the preservation of a past full of sentiments and historical sense maintained by religious communities'.⁸ And yet, as pilgrims to Mbah Munawwir's grave make clear, *ziarah* is not primarily oriented toward the transmission of narrative or factual information. Scholars of collective or social memory and heritage have offered us a variety of ways to think about understandings of the past that are shared within a community. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) has pointed to the potential of memory for providing a group with their sense of identity while constantly adapting to new contexts. Bloembergen and Eickhoff (2019) showed that constructions of the past as heritage play foundational roles in sacralizing national projects (see also Taneja 2017; Zerubavel 1994); Elizabeth Castelli (2004) showed that memory, in religious traditions, naturalizes continuities with a normative past (see also Assmann 2006; Novetzke 2008); and Najam Haider (2014) demonstrated how it narrativizes theological difference. But what does it mean to remember when the primary concern is not the transmission of information? The relative indifference about the details of Mbah Munawwir's life make manifest a dimension of cultural heritage that side-steps understandings of memory as primarily concerned with information, an understanding that has become dominant in the Western tradition with the advent of modernity.

To understand what it means for memory to be irreducible to this modern paradigm, I enlist the help of Walter Benjamin, who similarly pushed back against modern understandings of knowledge, especially the knowledge of history. Benjamin adopted the terminology of Marcel Proust to differentiate between two sorts of memory, which correspond to two broad ways of relating to the past. 'Voluntary recollection' organizes discrete information in a way that is factually accurate and comprehensible, but that cannot be assimilated into personal recollections of the past because it isolates occurrences from each other and from the totality of conscious experience. The past that is accessed in Proust's 'involuntary recollection' is the matter of what Benjamin calls 'tradition': a discourse transmitted not so much in the great works of civilization as

through the human infrastructure which makes them possible, or the web of relations that cannot be articulated, but which make individual experiences meaningful (Benjamin 1969, 158–160; 202–203). It has a transformative power without being reducible to any individual's conscious knowledge or agenda. Benjamin's flaneur, who sets out to lose himself in the streets of Paris, can access involuntary recollection at particular sites (Benjamin 1999). Likewise, the pilgrim at the grave, although usually looking for something, can access such involuntary recollection, because the grave turns out to be connected ontologically, narratively, and ritually to an incomprehensibly large and complex web of realities.

While Benjamin's account may be embedded in a philosophical tradition that is quite unlike the contemporary Javanese context, it can nonetheless help us to articulate an alternative framework to comprehend cultural heritage, one that highlights the non-discursive power of memory. His theoretical approach seems especially appropriate because his thoughts resonate not merely with my interlocutors' understandings, but also with theorizations of memory in traditional Javanese literary narratives, which likewise unsettle the idea that memory is only a matter of transmitting factual information. Nancy Florida has shown that historical accounts in traditional Java were consciously and explicitly written with the intent to touch the readers' presents and futures. She discusses this future-oriented historical perspective in accounts of the past by reference to the semantic range of the Javanese word *mengêti*, which can mean 'to remember' or to document historical records as a repository of facts about the past. But it can also signify 'to commemorate' or 'celebrate history, whereby past-as-memory is actualized' (Florida 1995, 395–396). And finally, it also means 'to predict' or 'prophesy', 'a prescient present's writing about a past which opens to a desired future' (Florida 1995, 397). By remembering and through the desire to commemorate a particular past, the virtues and possibilities of the past are made operative: 'The past event that the poet writes is finally realized, historically, by being read and reregistered, prophetically, in the presents and futures of its readers'.⁹

This understanding of connecting past, present, and future also pervades what is perhaps the most famous and most consequential story of a grave visitation in Java's history, a story about Sultan Agung (d. 1645), the most powerful ruler of Mataram, Java's first major Muslim dynasty (c.1576–1755). In the traditionalist historical imaginary, Mataram is the polity that facilitated the spread of Islam Nusantara in Java. But in spite of his unparalleled royal power, things did not always look good for Sultan Agung. In 1633, he was politically weakened. A few years before he had suffered a devastating military loss against the VOC, and now he was facing rebellions from different villages in his kingdom. With his authority precariously uncertain, Sultan Agung undertook a pilgrimage to the graveyard of Těmbayat, the resting place of Sunan Bayat, an area where rebellion against the king was especially strong.¹⁰ According to some accounts,¹¹ Sunan Bayat was the last king of Majapahit, Java's great medieval Hindu-Buddhist kingdom (1293–c.1500). The fall of Majapahit is linked in Javanese chronicles to the rise of Islam and the mission of the nine saints in the sixteenth century (Rinkes 1912–13). It is said that Sunan Bayat was driven from his court by Muslim conquerors, but then converted to Islam when he encountered one of the nine saints, who recognized his spiritual powers and even admitted Sunan Bayat to the ranks of the nine saints. Sunan Bayat thus embodies the lineages, and the spiritual powers, of both pre-Islamic and Islamic Java.

One account of Sultan Agung's visit to the grave at Těmbayat is given in a manuscript kept today at Leiden (LOR 6476), which was inscribed at the court of the Yogyakarta Sultanate, one of Mataram's heirs, in the late nineteenth century.¹² A so-called *Babad Nitik*, the text belongs to the genre of a chronicle focusing on the personal and spiritual affairs of the king (Pigeaud 1967, 160–162). We learn in this chronicle that Sultan Agung, at the time of his visit, was in a state of spiritual turmoil, because he desired to deepen his spirituality but was unable to do so. Lost in meditation, he is called upon by a mysterious figure who suddenly appears before him.

Citra priyayi bagus kang wanci satěngah tuwuh
 busananira sakalangkung adi kaot
 cahyanira sumunu
 sorotnya lir purnama sidi
 kang trang tan katawěngan
 ing ngima lan měndhung

His face was handsome, he was
 middle aged, his garments
 magnificent and exquisite.
 He was shining like the full moon
 Whose brightness is obscured
 by neither mist nor rainclouds.
 (LOR 6476 II-26)

Sultan Agung is unsure what to make of this apparition, who is not only magnificent in appearance, but also seems to know all about Sultan Agung and his spiritual crisis. Sultan Agung asks him to reveal his name and origin. But the apparition will not tell him – not yet. Instead,

Sinlamur-lamur pandika manis
 Eh ta sultan andika tampiya
 Sihing Yyang murbeng ngalame
 Kula puniki tuhu
 Wus kalilan amějang ngelmi
 dhumatěng sri nalendra
 tandya jěng sultanu
 winějang ngelmu sě[ng]keran
 Rěhning ratu wirutamaning pa[ng]galih
 lepas kang pa[ng]grahita

Evading the question, his words were sweet:
 'Oh Sultan, you shall receive
 the love of the Lord who rules the world,
 for indeed, I have
 already been granted permission to teach knowledge
 to you, king'.
 In an instant, the Sultan
 was taught secret knowledge.
 Hence the king became exceedingly brave in his heart
 and far-reaching in his mind.
 (LOR 6476 II-33)

Asked if he has received the figure's knowledge, the king confirms it, and only then is the mysterious figure willing to disclose his identity: 'Truly, I am the Sunan who resides at Bayat'.

The knowledge of Sunan Bayat, Java's last pre-Islamic king who became a Muslim saint knowing the secret knowledge of Islam, represents an Islamization of Java's pre-Islamic history; and Sultan Agung's remembering, the Javanese *mengěti* which activated this knowledge for himself, also made it operative for posterity: Sultan Agung marked his own transformative experience by changing the Javanese measurement of time. Up until then, the Javanese courts had been using the luni-solar Indian-derived Śaka calendar. Sultan Agung now introduced a hybrid calendrical system, the so-called Javanese calendar, where the Śaka numerical sequence was kept but continued with lunar years (Ricklefs 2006, 42). By converting the calendar, Sultan Agung projected the knowledge he learned at the grave of Těmbayat into Java's future.

Today's Muslims continue to access the spiritual resources of the past through concrete objects, like the calendar. I once attended a meeting of one of Krapyak's teachers with people from the community who came to ask for solutions to their troubles: one

man was afraid of losing his job; another had problems with his son. The teacher gave a bottle of water he had breathed on to one, and then got up to take off his shirt and put on another, handing the worn shirt to the second. 'It's charged with blessings', my research assistant whispered in my ear. When the people had left, the teacher turned to me and said, unprompted by any question: 'I have never been to school, Ms. Everything I know I learned at the grave.' It is rumoured in Krapyak that in his youth he had spent several years living in Mbah Munawwir's cemetery. While there, by remembering Mbah Munawwir's knowledge and virtues, the teacher was 'acted upon' (Mittermaier 2011, 163) by a force that transcended his consciousness and that disrupted or reinterpreted his experience of the present. He continued, 'The most important thing is to keep learning and to show kindness to all'. Learning at graves turned him, and his breath and shirt, into agents of a living past that could be passed on to others as a blessing (*J. berkat*; *A. barakah*).

When Sultan Agung asked Sunan Bayat for his name, the latter declined to answer at first; his name was not as important as his knowledge. Today's pilgrims, who do not know any biographical data of the dead they are visiting, also want to access a pious predecessor's power and knowledge in the present and to interpret and transform the present and the future. Those who do *ziarah* do expect to find their interpretation of their world transformed as unforeseen possibilities are opened up by this knowledge, a knowledge that is both Islamic and local. They may only have partial access to the knowledge of Java's past and their pious ancestors, but it permeates time through objects like graves, or the calendar and the teacher's shirt, just as the whole involuntary memory of the city of Paris permeates the scenes witnessed by Benjamin's flaneur.

Ethics: the power of the chain

'The most important thing is to keep learning and to show kindness to all', the teacher had said, pointing to the ethical dimension of memory, the ethic governing the relationship between the living and the dead, to which I will turn now. One of the stories I heard from a different teacher was about Mbah Munawwir's last student, Rifa'i. When Rifa'i joined Krapyak in the early 1940s, Mbah Munawwir knew he was going to pass soon, and so he encouraged the student to memorize the Qur'an very quickly so he could examine and bestow onto him his license (*A. ijazah*) and his prestigious intellectual genealogy (*I./A. sanad*). The student managed to memorize the whole Qur'an just before Mbah Munawwir's death in 1942, but, having been rushed, his memorization was imperfect. After the war, Rifa'i became a civil servant and more or less forgot what he had memorized. Then, one night, Mbah Munawwir came to him in a dream and admonished him to preserve his memorization. And Rifa'i obeyed: he quit his job – something that likely entailed significant financial hardship in the dire postwar years – and dedicated himself fully to memorizing the Qur'an until he had become an expert. At that point, Mbah Munawwir returned to him in a dream and confirmed that Rifa'i's command of the Qur'an, which had just been average, was now extraordinary. 'And this', the teacher concluded his story to me, 'means that Mbah Munawwir is still present and continues to care for his students and his student's students'.

The knowledge and power of remembered figures, I have shown, remain present among those who remember them. The pious dead are entitled to respectful treatment, but they also continue to be responsible and to care for their successors. This reciprocal

relation between the living and the dead becomes manifest in two common prayers at the grave, *tawassul* and *tahlil*. By considering these two prayers in relation to each other, I argue that the agentic capacity of memory to bring about a desired future is contingent on an ethic of reciprocity, that memory is agentic when this reciprocal relationship is intact and virtuous. Respectful remembrance is thus an ethical project, an embodied practice that cultivates the right attitude that can open up the possibility of entering into communion with other subjectivities and the divine (see Asad 1997, 48; Mauss 1973, 87). While this cultivation is pursued by individuals, the dynamic of the reciprocal relation transcends the individual as an ethical agent. As Marcel Mauss argued in *The Gift*, the reciprocal exchange of favours and commitment establishes social relations as 'lives are mingled together' (Mauss 1990, 20). For my interlocutors, such relations also extend to those who have already passed away: while the activity and intervention of the dead are expected, the dead require obedience and respect in return.

Tawassul and *tahlil* are both supplicatory prayers uttered in Arabic, where the naming of an addressee is followed by the recitation of a Qur'anic Surah, which is offered for the benefit of the named person or persons. Whereas *tawassul* is not limited to prayers at the grave but can be performed in a wide range of different situations, *tahlil* in contemporary Southeast Asia is specifically known as a prayer for the dead.¹³ Some have noted that there is a transactional element to the prayer, whereby the dead are offered the merit (I./J. *pahala*¹⁴) accrued through the recitation in exchange for blessings (Millie 2008, 111). In this exchange, the merit of religious devotion becomes operative for the dead on the day of judgment, whereas the living get to enjoy more mundane blessings: finding a marriage partner, success in an examination, the end of social conflicts, the electoral victory of one's preferred presidential candidate (Jamhari 2001, 112–117). However, many of my interlocutors have resisted transactional understandings, framing the prayers instead as the deepening of their relationship with and expression of love for the deceased that is a virtue in itself, or conceptualizing *barakah* as blessings that will lead to a deeper engagement in religious devotion and hence the accrual of more merit (see also Jamhari 2001, 113). As Amira Mittermaier noted in her analysis of almsgiving, in the religious context Mauss's dyad becomes a triad, since it links people not only to each other, but also to God (Mittermaier 2019, 8). Likewise, nurturing virtuous relations with the dead ultimately also leads to a deeper relation with the divine.

Tawassul, often translated as prayer of intercession, is a prayer to God through a *wasilah* or intermediary, someone whom the one praying considers to be closer to God than herself. According to NU's founder, Hasyim Asy'ari, 'the understanding of using a *wasilah* is that a servant of God asks God for help by way of people who are certain to have rank and stature at God's side, like the prophets and the wali'. But, Asy'ari clarified, 'we only invoke Allah and we only pray to Him. Because when we are certain that someone has a high rank, we do not actually make them the focus of our belief. They are only servants who have a close relationship with Allah, someone who can ask Allah on our behalf for whatever it is that we have requested' (Asy'ari 2005, 132–133). Asy'ari's fatwa corresponds to how most contemporary traditionalists understand *tawassul*. My interlocutors often referenced the Qur'anic origin of the practice, citing *Sūrat al-Mā'ida* 35, 'You who believe, be mindful of God, seek a *wasilah* to Him and be mindful for His cause, so you may prosper;' and *Sūrat al-Isrā'* 57, 'Those [angels] they pray to are themselves seeking a *wasilah* to their Lord, even those who are closest to

Him'.¹⁵ They furthermore refer to a Hadith, according to which 'Umar, at times of drought, turned to the Prophet's uncle to ask for rain: "'O Allah! We used to ask our Prophet to invoke (A. *natawassul*) You for rain, and now we ask his uncle to invoke (A. *natawassul*) You for rain. O Allah! Bless us with rain!" And so it would rain' (Bukhārī 1976). Another teacher at Krapyak whom I will call Kyai Abdullah here told me that *tawassul* commemorates the fact that no one is self-sufficient in their religious knowledge and devotion, but depends on others, like for example their school's founder. What today's Muslims know, what they intellectually grasp and what they have realized through their spiritual practice, was transmitted to them by many generations of scholars who preceded them. At schools like Krapyak, scripts for addressing their founder as a *wasīlah* are often made available, printed in Arabic in cheap booklets for easy distribution. The following is an excerpt from a prayer book, *Al-Munawwiriyyah*, that is sold at the Krapyak bookstore.

In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

To the presence of the Prophet, the Chosen, our Master and Lord, Muhammad, God's peace and blessings be upon him, and to his family, his wives, his descendants, and his associates, for them, *al-Fātiḥah* ...

Also, to the presence of the all the prophets, the messengers, the companions, the followers, the saints, the martyrs, the righteous, and the scholars,

especially to the founder of this institution, our Shaykh Simbah Kyai Muhammad Munawwir bin 'Abd Allah Rashād,

and his wives, their ancestors, lineages, and descendants, those under their protection, the wives of their sons, the community of Muslims and believers, those who are alive and those who are dead, for them, *al-Fātiḥah* ... (Sekretariat Pondok Pesantren Krapyak Yogyakarta 2015, 86–87)

We see in this script that Mbah Munawwir as an intermediary is not considered in isolation, but rather in the company of all those who had to do with him, whether directly or indirectly. 'It's a whole package', one senior student told me. He explained that adding Mbah Munawwir's whole network, those who preceded him like the prophets, messengers, companions, and so on, but also those who succeeded him, like his students and descendants, was a way to make visible the lineages of spiritual dependence. At the very beginning of the lineage is the Prophet Muhammad, with whom all knowledge became manifest and began to be transmitted. Those in the chain are genealogical intermediaries, but they are also epistemological and ontological intermediaries through which the knowledge that was first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad becomes manifest in the here and now. The teacher's explanation of invoking the spiritual genealogy in *tawassul* resonates with other scholars' work on the genealogical imagination in Islam. According to Engsen Ho, in Ḥadramī conceptualizations of genealogy, lineages of biological descent or transmission of knowledge that can be traced back to the Prophet Muḥammad are understood to transport the Muhammadan Light through history (Ho 2006, 117–130). The historical journey of the Muhammadan Light is located in an ontological realm between *wujūd*, pure existence, and the phenomenal world, where things partake and derive their relative existence from *wujūd*. If the realm of *wujūd* and the phenomenal world are the two poles of Ibn al-'Arabī's ontology, intermediate degrees are known as the imaginal world: *'ālam al-khayāl* or *'ālam al-takhayyul*, which

can be opened up by the epistemic faculty of imagination (Chittick 1989, 12–16; Ho 2006, 126–127).

In their conceptualization of *tawassul* at graves, my interlocutors participated in the same kind of discourse, even if specific references to Ibn al-ʿArabī were rare. The dead who are remembered and addressed as *wasilah* are not just mediators in prayer. They are also genealogical intermediaries that constitute the links in the chain of transmission reaching back to the Prophet Muḥammad, and ontological and epistemological intermediaries that transport the Muhammadan Light. They thus constitute a kind of imaginal infrastructure that connects the present with what Anand Taneja has called an ‘elsewhen’ where the past ‘as a field of potential ... destabilizes present states of affairs’ (Taneja 2017, 60). The traditionalist Javanese scholar Zamakhsyari Dhofier has called this imaginal infrastructure ‘the spiritual power of the chain’ (Dhofier 1999, 58) between student and teacher, or between the pious dead and contemporary Muslims. This chain, he writes, must not be cut: ‘Students’ respect for their teachers is absolute and everlasting, and must be expressed in all aspects of life. It is contrary to their religious values for a student to forget his tie to his teacher’ (Dhofier 1999, 61). When a student does forget, Dhofier explains, the student loses the teacher’s blessings. As a result, the student’s knowledge may not disappear, but it will become ineffective.¹⁶ Similarly, in a standard textbook read at traditionalist schools entitled *Ta’lim al-Muta’allim (Instruction of the Student)* by Burhān al-Dīn Zarnūjī,¹⁷ students are exhorted to honour their teacher:

Know that in the study of science one holds in esteem knowledge and those who possess it. One [must also] glorify and venerate the teacher. It is said: He who attains knowledge does not do so except through respect, while he who fails [in this goal] does so by ceasing to respect and venerate learning and its bearers. [In addition] it is stated: Respect is preferable to obedience, for do you not perceive that man does not become an unbeliever through rebellion [against divine law] but rather by making light [of his rebellion] and by discarding reverence. One aspect of glorifying knowledge consists in holding the teacher in esteem (Zarnūjī 1947, 32).

Tawassul is the prayer through which the students respectfully remember this dependence. Dhofier’s demand that the student remember their chain of dependence at first glance looks like the opposite of involuntary recollection; but information is not what is at stake here: by remembering the chain, the student brings about a space where discrete objects or moments give access to a whole tradition. The one praying chooses an appropriate link in the chain, one with whom they have a direct relationship. But like Benjamin’s involuntary recollection, the activation of a single link activates the whole web of dependence in the Islamic universe, something much larger than any individual can conceive.

In the reciprocal relation between the living and the dead, *tawassul* is supposed to benefit the one praying by activating the chain, whereas *tahlil* in the Malay-Indonesian world is a prayer of paying respect and returning the favour to the dead in a spirit of gratefulness for their contributions. The living are responsible for the dead, for although they are no longer part of the phenomenal world, they are still present: ‘I used to live across the Krapyak graveyard’, Kyai Abdullah once told me, ‘and every Saturday night I would see people arriving on their motorbikes, young couples, and they would get off and walk into the graveyard’. Cemeteries are not only a destination for the pious: for young Javanese lovers, they are often one of the few places where they can find some privacy under

the cover of darkness to make out. 'I went to the Neighborhood Warden and told him that we had to do something to stop this', he told me. But the Neighborhood Warden declined to get involved. After all it was none of his business what people were doing with their boyfriends or girlfriends. 'Of course it is none of our business', Kyai Abdullah growled, 'but this is a graveyard! The people there still exist, even if their way of existing is different from ours'.

To explain the significance of *tahlil*, my interlocutors at Krapyak often drew on a book by the medieval Islamic theologian Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah titled *Kitāb al-Rūh*, 'The book of the spirit'. In this text, Ibn al-Qayyim discussed the relation of the *rūh*, the soul or spirit,¹⁸ to the body and the material, phenomenal world after a person has died. He maintained that the spirit is what he called a 'self-standing entity' (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah 2010–11, 108) that continues to have a conscious liminal existence in the realm of *barzakh*, an intermediate realm between this world and the next, until the Day of Judgment (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah 2010–11, 111). The spirit 'rises and descends; joins and disconnects; departs, comes, and goes; moves and is still' (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah 2010–11, 108); or in other words, is mobile but still somehow connected to the earth where the body was buried, where its presence is still most perceptible. According to Ibn al-Qayyim, the dead in the grave, or their spirits in this intermediate realm, receive the dues for their actions during their lives; the pious are rewarded, and the wicked are punished (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah 2010–11, 110–111). Ibn al-Qayyim calls these states '*adhāb al-qabr*, the punishment of the grave, and *ni'mat al-qabr*, the bliss of the grave. Crucially, he differentiated between two types of punishment of the grave: the first type is the punishment for unbelievers or those who have committed serious sins during their lives. Their torment continues uninterrupted until the Day of Rising, at which point they will undergo God's final judgment. The second type is for those who are punished for their more insignificant wrongdoings (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah 2010–11, 279–283). This second type of torment, according to Ibn al-Qayyim, can be relieved by those who are still alive, for example through prayers, like *tahlil*. Although the prerogative to ease the punishment is God's, not the intercessor's (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah 2010–11, 271), it is a moral obligation for the living to make supplications on behalf of the dead, whose window of opportunity to attend to their status in the afterlife has closed for good.

'There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one', Benjamin wrote in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. 'Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim' (Benjamin 1969, 254; his italics). For my traditionalist interlocutors, the dead also have a claim on the living, a claim that the living treat them with utmost respect and to pray for their salvation. Like Java's poets, who not only remembered but also actualized the past, through their *ziarah*, they 'effectively activate[] a relay across time in order, thereby, more effectively to touch both those who preceded [them] and those who will come after' (Florida 2019, 103). But as Benjamin wrote, in this 'secret agreement', the 'image of happiness' of the living 'is indissolubly bound up' with the redemption of the past (Benjamin 1969, 254). In the same vein, for memory to become an agent of the knowledge and power of the dead and, with it, God's grace and blessings, it has to be rooted in a virtuous relationship with other subjectivities and temporalities. If *tahlil* redeems the dead in their graves from punishment, *tawassul* makes use of the

power of the lineage to activate a normative past by acknowledging their contributions to one's own happiness, the possibility of a deep and loving relationship with the pious of the past and, along with them, the divine.

Identity and the power of the imaginal

'But why', I would often ask my interlocutors at Krapyak, 'would you, as traditionalists, go to the grave of Ahmad Dahlan?' We are now finally returning to the question I set out to answer in the beginning. As we recall, traditionalist *ziarah* to Dahlan's grave seems paradoxical for two reasons. First: they often have strong reservations about Muhammadiyah, the organization Ahmad Dahlan founded, and dislike going to the grave because it is in a creepy Muhammadiyah graveyard. And second, Ahmad Dahlan himself reportedly declared that visiting graves, including presumably his own, is un-Islamic. 'Why would you go to the grave of Ahmad Dahlan?' And almost without fail, my traditionalist interlocutors would explain to me that in truth, Ahmad Dahlan was a traditionalist, that he was even one of Java's greatest traditionalist ulama, and that his grave needs to be visited, no matter what his opinion on the matter was.

Ahmad Dahlan may have founded an organization that would criticize traditionalist values, but in his youth, I was often told, he was educated by the great *ulama* of nineteenth century Java, the successors of the nine saints, who imprinted Islam Nusantara on the Javanese geography and temporality. He was a part of Islam Nusantara through his lineage of learning. What is more, my traditionalist interlocutors would often tell me, Ahmad Dahlan was best friends with Hasyim Asy'ari, the founder of NU. They divided up the work of deepening the Islam of the Javanese by focusing on different parts of the population, and therefore their approaches differed, as was the case with the nine saints, who similarly shared the task.¹⁹ He was a traditionalist because he was part of the Islam Nusantara, the Islam of Java that was projected into the future by the nine saints. Activating their knowledge, he and Hasyim Asy'ari made their Islamizing mission operative again. 'Why did he reject grave visitations if he was a traditionalist?', I asked. Perhaps he was simply mistaken about this matter, some said. Perhaps it was a strategic question, others surmised. Different explanations could be found, but ultimately, the reason for his strange behaviour was completely irrelevant. As we read in Zarnūjī's treatise on education, respect for the teacher is not the same as obedience (Zarnūjī 1947, 32). Even if, later in his life, Ahmad Dahlan may have changed his mind and rejected grave visitations, he was still part of the intellectual and ritual lineages of Islamic traditionalism that facilitate involuntary recollection when every link is honoured for their contribution.

In the seventeenth century, Sultan Agung had activated the knowledge of Sunan Bayat, one of the founding figures of Islam Nusantara, through his conversion that incorporated the pre-Islamic spiritual powers into the fold of Islam. And today's traditionalists at Ahmad Dahlan's grave similarly activate the knowledge of Muhammadiyah's founder, which reactivated the knowledge of the nine saints in a new era. In Benjamin's understanding, memory practices of a certain sort can rescue the past that is lost or submerged in capitalist temporality. Traditionalist Javanese Muslims likewise recover a heritage that would be lost when the understanding of history is premised on a secular, modernist temporality which assumes the 'absolute alterity of a positively dead past' (Florida 1995, 52).

The spiritual knowledge and power of pre-Islamic Java is rescued and claimed for the future when Sunan Bayat's conversion is remembered and inscribed narratively in the chronicles and ritually in the calendar and in *ziarah*. In the same way, Ahmad Dahlan is not lost to Islam Nusantara despite his strange modernist ideas and his followers' unfortunate interpretations, because he can be reincorporated or rediscovered through the activation of the lineages of which he was a part through *tawassul* and *tahlil*, or through narratives of his friendship, even partnership, with NU's founder.

And so traditionalists go to Karangajen, although they greatly dislike the cemetery, which they don't think of as clean, as modernists do, but as creepy, with a frightening aura. Perhaps Benjamin would have agreed that the grave has an aura, the spectral presence of that which has been forgotten or repressed 'comes together in a flash with the now' (Benjamin 1999, 462; see also 1969, 255). When I asked a group of students who had recently gone there what this creepiness was all about, they explained that it was because so few people pray at this cemetery. If no one prays for the dead, their graves become creepy; creepy because they become the site where the dead are being punished in their graves, creepy because of the agony of those not prayed for. And one of those people not prayed for is Ahmad Dahlan. 'Just imagine', one said. 'He is punished without cease'. But another girl remembered,

When I came to the Karangajen cemetery, I was scared at first. It was so quiet. But when I came to Ahmad Dahlan's grave, I wasn't scared anymore because I felt, I knew, that there was one of Java's great ulama watching out over the place.

The notion of Ahmad Dahlan being tortured because of his followers' negligence, and his protecting traditionalists paying their respects to him, incorporates the founder of Muhammadiyah into a traditionalist ontology based on an ethic of reciprocity that facilitates an involuntary recollection whereby the dead redeem the living and vice versa. By claiming Ahmad Dahlan's continued presence, my traditionalist interlocutors integrated Ahmad Dahlan into the fold of NU's tradition not only discursively or narratively, but also ontologically, by assigning him a position in the chain that connects past and present and makes the heritage of Islam Nusantara operative today. *Tawassul* and *tahlil* activate the spiritual power of the chain of transmission as memory destabilizes the binary between past and present for those who have come to the graves to learn from the past, through an imaginal infrastructure that aligns Java's history with the future. Irreducible to cognitive and social processes, these lineages transcend individual choice and include even those who seem to disagree, like Ahmad Dahlan, because the power of the chain is stronger than they are.

Notes

1. For more on the history of Muhammadiyah, especially in Java, see Alfian (1989) and Nakamura (2012). Beyond Java, the organization has been discussed by Bowen (1993) and Sila (2020).
2. That said, Muhammadiyah's position on grave visitations is actually much more complicated and ambiguous than is often admitted. For more on these dynamics, see Meyer (2024).
3. The foundation of Krapyak predates the institutional formation of NU in 1926, but the second and third generations of the school's leadership firmly established Krapyak as a regional center of NU.

4. See Dhofer (1999, 72–75) and Ali (2016, 51–55). Like elsewhere in the Islamic world, Indonesia’s traditionalist ulama lay claim to being representatives of the millennium-old tradition of Islamic learning as the basis of their identity and authority (Zaman 2002; Zeghal 1999, 2007). NU’s traditionalism is self-consciously defined as following Mātūrīdī-Ash‘ārī theology, a legal tradition or *fiqh* that is based on one of the four Sunni *madhhab* (in practice, most adhere to the Shāfi‘ī *maddhab*), and a Sufism that draws explicitly on Junayd and Ghazālī, the two quintessential ‘orthodox’ or ‘sober’ Sufis. Unlike in many other Islamic countries, where the traditionalist ulama are institutionally and politically fragmented, in Java traditionalism has mainly come to be associated with Nahdlatul Ulama. While not homogeneous, NU has provided its ulama a unified institutional platform.
5. While he never explicitly discussed the status of Java in relation to the Balkans-to-Bengal complex, Ahmad repeatedly referenced Javanese examples in support of his arguments about the textual-intellectual canons and the imaginal landscape of the region. Clearly, the geographic boundaries of the complex were porous for him (Ahmed 2016, 393–334; 450–451).
6. For more on these groups, see Zamhari (2010), according to whom these groups can be understood as local Sufi communities that operate outside of the *ṭarīqah* networks. Zamhari emphasizes their rootedness in and commitment to the shariah.
7. While there are no comprehensive studies of the phenomenon, scattered references strongly suggest tremendous growth. See for instance Armstrong (2006, 64–65); Keane (2022); Sri Mulyani and Daryono (2016); Quinn (2019, 384–387).
8. See Novetzke (2008, 2). In Novetzke’s work, this definition is for what he calls ‘public memory,’ I term I avoid here because of the conceptual problems inherent in understandings of the term ‘public’.
9. Florida (1995, 398). More recently, Florida has revisited these issues of remembering in Javanese literature by showing how poetry activated relays across time to connect the past, the present, and the future (see Florida 2019).
10. For a historical contextualization of Sultan Agung’s *ziarah* to Těmbayat, see Ricklefs (2006, 39–40). His pilgrimage appeased the region only temporarily, as the area around Bayat remained a center of political activism in opposition to royal centres until the early nineteenth century (Florida 1995, 341). For more about the myths surrounding Sultan Agung’s visit, see Doorn-Harder and Jong (2006, 491–493).
11. See Ricklefs (2006, 39), who, in turn, references Rinke (1912, 439–477, 1996, 72–98), who obtained this version of Sunan Bayat’s provenance from the keeper of the cemetery grounds (*J. juru kunci*) when he visited Bayat in the early twentieth century. According to other versions, Sunan Bayat was a regent of the city of Semarang and had no specific connection to Majapahit.
12. I am grateful to Els Bogaerts for sharing this manuscript and her work in progress with me when I could not access it myself. For more on the literary traditions around Sultan Agung, see Bogaerts (2021). See also Rinke (1912–13) and De Graaf (1958).
13. The practice of *tahlil* as a prayer for the dead can be found across the Malay-Indonesian world with some regional variation. The term *tahlil* means ‘to recite the words *lā illāha illā ‘llāh*’, although these words are only one component of the prayer as it is practiced in Java today: *tahlil* consists of a set sequence of Qur’anic passages and prayers recited in a set order. Outside of Southeast Asia, *tahlil* does not seem to appear in this form as a prayer for the dead. Of course, the recitation of the words *lā illāha illā ‘llāh* is recommended on for a variety of contexts and occasions (Padwick 1961, 129–136).
14. Although it is derived from Sanskrit *phala* (reward for good deeds), *pahala* has entered the conceptual vocabulary of Islam in Indonesia.
15. While I leave *wasilah* untranslated, the translation is M.A.S. Abdel Haleem’s (2010), who renders *wasilah* as ‘way’ in both cases. In the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, which is widely used in Javanese *pesantren* (van Bruinessen 1990, 265), including Krapyak, it is rendered as ‘the kind of obedience that brings you close to Him’ (al-Maḥallī & al-Suyūṭī 2002, 122) and as seeking ‘nearness through obedience’ (al-Maḥallī & al-Suyūṭī 2002, 297). Hasyim Asy‘ari, in his

above cited fatwa on *tawassul*, agreed with the gloss in the *Tafsir al-Jalālayn*, but noted that it could also have a more specific meaning of addressing God by way of people of great righteousness, as is apparent in the above cited passage (Asy'ari 2005, 131).

16. These concerns about forgetting can also be found in traditional Javanese literature, especially in the work of the nineteenth-century poet Ranggasmita studied by Nancy Florida. In Ranggasmita's work, those who fail to remember the dead find themselves 'lost in ignorance and insanity' (Florida 2019, 101). These parallels attest to continuities between traditional Javanese literature and contemporary traditionalist Islam.
17. Zarnūjī was a twelfth/thirteenth century Muslim scholar from Khurasan. His treatise on Islamic education, *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, was widely influential, including in Southeast Asia (van Bruinessen 1990, 257).
18. While some Islamic scholars, including for example al-Tirmidhī (d. 824), have differentiated between the spirit (*rūḥ*) and the soul (*nafs*) as two distinct subtle faculties representing spiritual and material orientations, others, like Ghazālī (d. 1111), have treated the two more or less interchangeably. This article follows the latter convention, treating the two terms as synonymous (Gobillot 2010).
19. Indeed, Ahmad Dahlan and Hasyim Asy'ari both boarded with and learned from some of the same scholars, including Sholeh Darat from Semarang (d. 1903) and Kholil from Bangkalan, Madura (d. 1925). Yet, while the ideological differentiation between traditionalism and modernism only developed gradually (see Laffan [2003]), and there have always been ties of friendship and even marriage among their early leadership – Ahmad Dahlan was even married to Mbah Munawwir's sister for a short period of time – there is no evidence for such a deliberate cooperation between the two scholars. Nonetheless, such narratives are very popular in Indonesia today.

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Sertaç Sehlirkoglu for inviting me to contribute to this special issue, and to M. Zisan Koker for her valuable help as editorial assistant. Thank you also to the innumerable people who have given helpful feedback as I was writing this article, including the anonymous reviewer. Earlier versions of this article have been presented at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the National University of Singapore, the University of Oslo, and Leiden University. To all organizers and audiences many thanks. Finally, I would like to gratefully acknowledge all my interlocutors in Java, although I can only thank them anonymously.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Field research for this article was generously funded by the Mellon Humanities International Travel Fellowship, the Global Religion Research Initiative Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship, and the Columbia University Institute for Religion, Culture, and Public Life Dissertation Fellowship.

Ethical clearance

Ethical Approval was obtained through the IRB at Columbia University (Protocol Protocol IRB-AAAR9612 (Y04M00)).

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