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Meyer, V. H.

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Ambiguity by Another Name: Muslim Modernist Dream Encounters in Indonesia

Verena Meyer | ORCID: 0000-0001-5465-4833

Leiden Institute for Area Studies, Leiden University, Leiden,
The Netherlands

v.h.meyer@hum.leidenuniv.nl

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Abstract

Over the last decade, scholars of Islam have increasingly turned to the imaginal – forces not immediately visible or tangible – and its effects on the broad range of Muslim understandings of reality and truth. Much of this scholarship has implicitly suggested that the exploratory character of the imaginal and its acceptance of multiple truths and values is the prerogative of traditionalist Muslims, while its ambiguities are inherently oppositional to the project of modernity. This idea has been most explicitly articulated by Thomas Bauer, according to whom modernization annihilated ambiguity in Muslim communities. Focusing on stories about dream encounters, I complicate these binaries by showing that the so-called epistemic norms of modernity cannot be easily mapped onto this traditionalist-modernist conceptual pair, as the capacity to tolerate ambiguity may take different forms. While modernist Muslims may themselves insist on the fundamental incompatibility of the modernist project with the imaginal and its ambiguous understandings of the real, they reconceptualize experiences of ambiguity in terms that differentiate them from premodern or traditionalist conceptualizations.

Keywords

ambiguity – dreams – Indonesia – Islam – modernity

Over the last decade, anthropologists of Islam have increasingly approached dreams as a site of ethnographic inquiry. Their studies have demonstrated the social and political power of forces not immediately visible or tangible, often conceptualized as the realm of the “imaginal,” a translation of the Arabic *khayāl* or *takhayyul*. This realm of the imaginal is an old concept in the work of speculative Sufism, perhaps most prominently in the work of Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240), where it represents an intermediate space between God’s pure being and the phenomenal world (Chittick 1989: 14). But more than an abstract philosophical concept, the imaginal also plays an important role among contemporary Muslims’ everyday understandings of how believers can know and encounter the *ghaib* – that which is hidden or nonsensually manifest. As Amira Mittermaier wrote in her pathbreaking work on dreams in Islamic Egypt, the imaginal references a “range of meanings that encompass a variety of spaces, modes of perception, and conceptualizations of the real” (2011: 3). Following in her footsteps, scholars have focused on the capacity of dreams to complicate binary outlooks in relation to understandings of truth, virtue, and subjectivity. Their work has shown how the imaginal can form communities that transcend linear temporality (Rasmussen 2022; Taneja 2017), how it can trouble perceived antinomies between “Western” science and “Islamic” spirituality (El Shakry 2017; Yuminah 2018), and how it becomes operative in contemporary forms such as social media (Alatas 2021). The imaginal, as it is revealed through dreams, exemplifies the exploratory character of Islam, which, in the words of Shahab Ahmed, allows for a “multiplicity of truths and value” (2016: 286) as opposed to an orthodoxizing trajectory and impulse (Alatas 2019: 71).

Much of this scholarship has focused on the imaginal among self-consciously traditionalist or Sufi communities. This is where we have come to expect Muslims accessing the realm of the imaginal through dreams. Implicitly or explicitly, these traditionalists are often portrayed as being in an antagonistic relationship with self-identified modernist or Salafi Muslims, whose understandings of what counts as real or what dreams might show are often based on materialist and rationalist epistemologies, leaving little room for knowledge from beyond the phenomenal world. As a result, scholarship on the imaginal has rather conveyed the impression that its exploratory character and acceptance of multiple truths and values is the prerogative of traditionalist Muslims, and especially traditionalist Sufis, while implying that the imaginal is inherently oppositional to the project of modernity.

The most explicit articulation of such a binary between traditional or traditionalist and modern or modernist Islam has been articulated by the German scholar of Islam Thomas Bauer. In his view, premodern Islam was characterized by a pervasive “culture of ambiguity,” a high tolerance for the

coexistence of multiple truths and values. He adopts the terminology of “tolerance” of ambiguity from psychology, where it often denotes enjoying and excelling in the performance of ambiguous tasks, whereas “intolerance” indicates the perception of ambiguity as a threat (2021: 17). As such, “tolerance” and “ambiguity” are not emic categories but heuristics adopted to understand these historical shifts in Islam. According to Bauer, premodern Islam actively cultivated, domesticated, and celebrated this multiplicity as an expression of God’s multifacetedness and ultimate unknowability. But, he argues, the process of modernization, brought about by the enforcement of Western epistemic parameters through colonialism and its associated disciplinary apparatuses, resulted in the “annihilation of ambiguity” (1) in Islamic communities. Modern Muslims, including on the one hand reformist Muslims who embrace modernity and on the other hand fundamentalist or Salafi Muslims, who are often thought to reject modernity but, as Bauer demonstrates, embrace many of its epistemic parameters, have broken with Islam’s long tradition of tolerating ambiguity (34). In the contemporary era, the remains of the once dominant culture of ambiguity can supposedly only be found in traditionalist circles that self-consciously distance themselves from the norms of Western modernity.

In this article, I want to complicate these binaries by showing that the so-called epistemic norms of modernity in general and understandings of dreams in particular cannot be mapped quite so neatly onto this traditionalist-modernist conceptual pair, and that the capacity to tolerate ambiguity may take different forms. Scholars of multiple modernities have long shown that modernity has more than just one trajectory (Eisenstadt 2000) – an insight that is true for Muslims as much as for anybody else. Indeed, life in the contemporary world, crisscrossed by competing globalized discourses and practices with their associated norms and values, is bound to generate moments of ambiguity (see Ewing 1997; Schielke 2015; Husein and Slama 2018). As I conducted field research in the central Javanese city Yogyakarta in 2018/19, I discovered that modernist Muslims are not necessarily attempting to eradicate ambiguity or simply enduring it. On the contrary, I found that they are quite capable of tolerating and even making productive use of a multiplicity of truth and value. For example, I encountered self-identified modernists using ambiguity to articulate their complex ideological positionalities in contradistinction from both traditionalist and Salafi Muslims; or to situate themselves in a sacred history beyond binary understandings of continuity and change (Meyer 2024, and forthcoming). Building on my previous work, this article proposes a different line of inquiry, focusing less on what ambiguity communicates and more on conceptualizations of ambiguity itself. For, even if the embrace of multiple truths was completely commonplace among my

interlocutors, I also experienced that they constantly invoked the idea that modernists are logical, rational, and coherent when they explained to me what it was like to be a modernist. In other words, their alleged incapacity to tolerate ambiguity has become an identity marker in its own right. In the following, I examine how my self-identified modernist interlocutors make use, and sense, of ambiguity while distancing themselves from Muslim orientations they reject. I argue that modernists reconceptualize and rename experiences of ambiguity in terms that are quite different from the ways familiar to us from premodern, traditionalist, and especially Sufi conceptualizations.

I focus on Muhammadiyah, an Indonesian Islamic mass organization founded in 1912 by Ahmad Dahlan. Born in 1868 as the son of a mosque official at the Grand Mosque of the Yogyakarta Sultanate in Central Java, Dahlan first underwent a local, traditional religious education. Then, in the early 1890s, like many others at the time, he left for Mecca and Medina to go on the hajj and to study.¹ According to his biographers,² this was a very formative experience for him. This was the time of Islamic reform, and the young Dahlan got acquainted with the thought of famous modernists such as Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā. Upon his return to Yogyakarta, he tried to initiate certain reforms in his community of the Great Mosque; most famously, he attempted to correct people’s prayer orientation through scientific methods, for which he experienced significant backlash from the mosque’s traditional elites. He also opened schools that integrated traditional Islamic education into a Western curriculum and incorporated Western pedagogical tools and methods, such as the chalkboard and the school bench.³ Today, the organization is a major political player in Indonesia but also continues to embody the religious values associated with Ahmad Dahlan’s initiatives to purify religion, as these memories demonstrate an ongoing commitment to a rationalization of Islam: an alignment of the timeless truths of Islam with the epistemic and institutional norms of modernity. This identification with modernity is very self-conscious – Muhammadiyah identifies as both modernist

1 Because of the rise of steamships and the opening of the Suez Canal, travel to the Hijaz had become more affordable by the late nineteenth century. For more on Southeast Asians in Mecca, see Laffan 2002.

2 The first proper biography of Ahmad Dahlan was written in the 1960s by Muhammadiyah member Solichin Salam (1963). Of the numerous biographies that have been published since then, many rely heavily on Salam’s and add little new information.

3 For more on Ahmad Dahlan’s life and some of his progressive initiatives, see Ali 2016: 38–44; Kim 2010; Meyer 2023.

(I. *modernis*) and progressive (I. *berkemajuan*).⁴ According to Bauer's taxonomy, Muhammadiyah would be a movement of reformist Islam rather than Salafi Islam. That said, the organization is very diverse, and there are strong antiliberal forces within it that point to continuities rather than a clear division between those two ways of inhabiting modern Islam.⁵

When Muhammadiyah members speak about their organization's historical trajectory, they often talk about their history as a struggle for the purification (I. *purifikasi*, *pemurnian*) of Islam from what they call TBC – *Takhayyul*, *Bid'a*, and *Churafat*, or Delusion, Innovation, and Superstition. The pun, is, of course, intended; un-Islamic behavior is just as dangerous as tuberculosis, also often abbreviated as TBC in Indonesia. Interesting for our purposes is the fact that the first word in this deadly triad, *takhayyul*, is the same as the word with which Sufis have long described the imaginal world. This denunciation of *takhayyul* as some sort of fanciful delusion seems to suggest that Muhammadiyah modernists would have very little patience for dream talk. And, in one sense, this is true. Most of my Muhammadiyah interlocutors, if asked directly, would say that most dreams have no value as an epistemic vehicle for knowing the divine. And yet, under the cover of this clear alignment with an epistemic stance that has come to be understood as an identity marker of modernist Islam, it turns out that dreams, in my interlocutors' everyday theologizing, play a role that is a lot more complicated, and perhaps even deliberately ambiguous, than it first seems.

1 Dreams and "Whatever"

Before I turn to these contemporary ambiguities in my field research, it will be useful to dwell for a moment on the historical development of dream interpretation in Islam, because despite any modern skepticism, veridical dreams have been an integral part of Islam since the beginning. In the Qur'an (39:42), we read that "God takes the souls of the dead and the souls of the living while they sleep," a verse that has often been interpreted as a confirmation that certain dreams have a divine origin and therefore reveal hidden truths (Kinberg 2005). Probably the most famous Qur'anic narrative of a veridical dream and its

4 The following key applies to abbreviations: I. Indonesian; A. Arabic; J. Javanese. For originally Arabic words that have entered the vocabularies of languages around the Islamic world, I give no original language.

5 Studies focusing on radical or conservative movements within Muhammadiyah include van Bruinessen 2013; Burhani 2013; Menchik 2016.

interpretation is of the Prophet Yusuf. According to the Sunna and biographical literature, dreams also played a significant role in the life of the Prophet Muhammad and, with it, the formation of the Islamic civilization.⁶ In time, Islamic intellectuals developed a robust theoretical framework for the interpretation of dreams. Ibn Sirīn (d. 728) is credited by tradition with the invention of the field of dream interpretation (A. *ta'bīr*) (Sirriyeh 2015: 68–70). By the ninth century, *ta'bīr* had become an established discipline that could be studied and transmitted through manuals.

In dialogue with, but never quite reducible to these scholastic works, dreams were also an essential part of everyday spirituality. Literature is full of examples where dreams facilitated Muslims' access to the realm of the unseen, the *ghaib*. Some dreams were quite enigmatic and needed to be interpreted by specialists. Others took the form of more or less clear communications. Dream appearances of the Prophet Muhammad are understood to be especially auspicious and relevant from a theological perspective, and meeting him is a great privilege (Kinberg 2012: 142–144). Very few figures openly claimed to have met God in dreams, and those who did so were often subjected to doubt and criticism (Ernst 1996; Katz 1996). Also controversial were dream messages from people who had passed away. Their communications were sometimes regarded with suspicion because of fears that evil spirits might be impersonating the pious dead. But these worries could never quite mute the idea that the deceased, with their first-hand knowledge of the hereafter, could bring important information from the beyond. In the ninth century, the hadith collector and scholar Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 894) composed well-known collections of such dream encounters. His collections became highly influential in the following centuries among Islamic theologians discussing the relation between this world and the afterlife, as well as interactions between the living and the dead.⁷ Because the dead have first-hand knowledge about the afterlife, they can deliver moral messages to help the living to enter heaven (Kinberg 1994: 18–27). They also know everything about the world of the living and are affected by their descendants' behavior, by which they can be embarrassed or pleased. Sometimes they ask their descendants for help, because while the dead have knowledge, they rely on the living for any kind of action.

6 For a more detailed account of the dream in early Islamic history, see Green 2003; Lamoreux 2002; Sirriyeh 2015.

7 Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's works on dreams as a means of encounter between the living and the dead include his *Book of Dreams* (*Kitāb al-Manām*), *Book of the Grave* (*Kitāb al-Qubūr*), *Book of Death* (*Kitāb al-Mawt*), and *Rising after Death* (*Man'āsha ba'd al-Mawt*) (Kinberg 1986: 289). For his legacy, see Kinberg 1994: 28–32.

One evening during my field research, I was sitting at a local eatery in Yogyakarta's university district with a man I will call Pak Agus, a person from an old Muhammadiyah family whose grandfather had been one of Dahlan's students and fellow activists. Because of his family history, he had agreed to talk to me about some of the stories that he had heard growing up. Not surprisingly, Pak Agus had emphasized to me throughout the interview what one would expect from a Muhammadiyah activist: his family, and Muhammadiyah more broadly, had always been invested in opposing any kind of superstition – they had been committed to the fight for rationality and against TBC. He had told me stories of his grandfather, who had laughed at people who thought that anybody, living or dead, might have any special powers, and how this same grandfather had encouraged his descendants to become teachers or doctors, the two professions he considered to be most important for fighting superstition and backwardness. Pak Agus quite enjoyed telling these stories, and because he was a good storyteller, I enjoyed hearing them. The formal part of the interview was finished, and we were just chatting about this and that when suddenly he began sharing a memory that made me perk up because it did not really fit – although in another sense it did fit. As he told the story, he stared into the flame of the candle on our table as though he was lost in a different world. The story went like this:

His grandfather had leased a piece of land and there was some confusion around the payment for its use. This confusion was still unresolved when the grandfather passed away. Just before his death, he asked his descendants to take care of the matter, but in the chaos and grief around his death, the affair was just forgotten. Then, many decades later, his son – Pak Agus' uncle – saw his father in a dream. This uncle had been a child when his father died and was the last of his siblings to be still alive at the time of the dream. In this dream, he saw his father crying. His uncle was wondering why that might be. After some inquiries, someone remembered the affair with the unsettled payment for the piece of land, and the uncle took care of the issue. Once that had happened, the grandfather reappeared to him in a dream, but this time he was smiling. At this point in the story, Pak Agus looked up from the flame right at me and said in a firm voice: "My uncle said, it was just a dream, he said that it had nothing to do with whatever" (*tidak ada kaitannya dengan yang macam-macam*).⁸ And then he explained in a tone that was very sober and completely unlike

8 The expression "macam-macam," literally translated as "various/all sorts [of things]," can also sometimes have a distinctly negative ring, connoting "nonsense" or "funny business." I have opted to translate it as "whatever," which preserves the broader lexical range of the Indonesian expression.

his earlier storytelling voice that not associating a dream with “whatever” was a way of fighting *takhayyul*. Others, those who believed in *takhayyul*, would surely have associated this dream with “whatever,” but not his uncle.

If we look at this dream from a mainstream Islamic standpoint, Pak Agus’ grandfather’s inability to settle his financial affairs before or at least soon after his death was in fact a serious problem. According to a Prophetic hadith, the soul of the believer is locked in the grave and unable to go to heaven until this debt is settled, whether it be pardoned or paid back (Tirmidhī n.d.: 1078). The normative content that Pak Agus’ uncle took the dreams to have – the instruction to settle his father’s financial affairs, and the satisfaction at having done so – is difficult to dispute according to most Muslims’ understandings of this hadith. This means that in Pak Agus’ story, we encounter the rather curious situation that while the dream’s message is pretty uncontroversial, the medium is anything but.⁹ The “whatever” that Pak Agus and his uncle were rejecting was the idea that the dead, once gone, had the possibility to interact with the living in any way.

The question whether the dead are accessible to the living is one of the key debates that organizes Islamic identity politics in Indonesia and that separates modernists from traditional Muslims and Sufis.¹⁰ The latter typically believe that the deceased continue to exist in the realm of *barzakh*, which is an intermediary realm between this world and the next. Because the realm of *barzakh* is not fully cut off from the phenomenal world, the living can maintain a relationship with their deceased predecessors through pilgrimage to their graves (A. *ziyāra*) or intercessionary prayers such as *tawassul* and *tahlil* (Bowen 1993; Millie 2008; Meyer 2025). In these communities, meeting the dead in dreams is a fairly normal and accepted way to receive knowledge, blessings, or instructions.

By contrast, the rejection of any possibility of having ongoing interactions with the dead is one of the building blocks of Islamic modernism in Indonesia. This emphatic impossibility is inscribed into Muhammadiyah discourse in their official communications and publications, including fatwas from the organization’s Council of Religious Rulings (Majelis Tarjih dan Tajdid) that are

9 This is not to say that dreams of unsettled debts or acting on them are unique in Indonesia or elsewhere, but that they are complicated within the modernist framework of thought. For another example of such a dream, see Samuels 2019: 100–101.

10 This debate transcends Indonesia, although the traditionalist-modernist divide does not neatly map onto understandings of this binary in other contexts. The extent to which the divide between traditionalism and modernism is discussed and institutionalized is especially pronounced in Indonesia – to the point that it even plays a major role in national politics.

distributed through Muhammadiyah's bi-weekly magazine and other in-house publications (see, for instance, Muhammadiyah 2022). My Muhammadiyah interlocutors have also often cited a hadith when explaining to me why it was impossible to reach people after their death: "When a man dies, his acts come to an end but three, recurring charity, or knowledge (by which people) benefit, or a pious son, who prays for him (for the deceased)" (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 1631). The only thing that is left of the dead is the legacy of their achievements. Praying for them is, of course, encouraged, but such prayers are directed to God and no response from the dead can be expected. And there is no particular reason to go to the grave to pray – you can just do so at home. There may be a realm of *barzakh*, but it is completely cut off from the realm of the living. The dead are gone. Veridical dreams may exist in theory – they are, after all, attested in the Qur'an. But specific claims of having had such a veridical dream would likely be eyed with a great deal of skepticism. The only partial exception is dreaming of the Prophet Muhammad, as we see in a fatwa where Muhammadiyah's Council of Religious Rulings cited a well-known hadith and concluded that dream appearances of the Prophet are always genuine because his status and virtue are such that any possibility of accident or evil force can be ruled out.¹¹ But even here, believers who have had dream encounters with the Prophet are urged not to talk about this experience publicly to avoid misunderstandings (Majelis Tarjih dan Tajdid 2023).

This reluctance to admit the veracity of dreams or to discuss them in public is not at all unique to Indonesia. Prominent historical spokespersons of the modernist movement in Islam, including Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) and Ḥasan al-Bannā (d. 1949), objected to the use of dreams as an epistemic means to gain insight into matters that were inaccessible through scripture or science and rationality (as cited in Mittermaier 2011: 45). Their hostility has become normative in many circles today. In 2003, official denunciations of dream visions as "idle talk" led to the cancellation of a popular Egyptian television program where a psychologist and a scholar from al-Azhar University interpreted dreams together (Mittermaier 2011: 32–34). And numerous other scholars have reported similar hostile reactions to dream interpretations across the Islamic world (see, for instance, Rasmussen 2022; Sirriyeh 2000; Telle 2017).

And yet, it turns out that the traditionalist-modernist binary in relation to dreams is not nearly as clear-cut as it first seems. A fatwa by the prominent Salafi spokesperson Ibn Bāz (d. 1999), for example, denied the authenticity and

11 The hadith in question was transmitted by Bukhārī: "The Prophet (ﷺ) said, 'Whoever has seen me in a dream, then no doubt, he has seen me, for Satan cannot imitate my shape'" (Bukhārī n.d.: 6994).

truth value of specific dream reports but simultaneously upheld traditional views of veridical dreams (Ibn Bāz 2007; see also Kinberg 2012: 149–151). Other Salafis have embraced *ta'bir* yet more fully, even to the point of attempting to articulate their own systematizations in manuals of how to interpret dreams.¹² Neither can dream interpretations be correlated to the otherworldly or especially peaceful and harmonious attitude that Orientalist discourse has often attributed to Sufis and traditionalists (Corbett 2017). Iain Edgar, for example, has drawn attention to the fact that dreams play a role among Jihadists and suicide bombers (Edgar 2011); and Annika Schmeding (2024) has shown that the engagement among some strands of the Taliban with dreams is not so unlike that of certain Afghan Sufi groups whose beliefs and practices they sharply criticize. And even rejections, when they occur, are not so clear-cut, as Fareeha Khan (2012) showed in relation to the reformist tradition of the Deobandis. For them, whether or not a dream is considered “true” appears to depend primarily on whether it conforms to the reformist vision of the Deobandis and a person’s broader spiritual trajectory.

Against this background, we may thus understand these modernist dream stories as another piece of evidence that the long-standing boundaries between modernist and traditionalist identities have softened somewhat over the last few decades (Howell 2001, 2012). But what we see in the case of Pak Agus’ account of his uncle’s dream is more than a trajectory of ideological reconciliation: in his story, rejection and acceptance appear to go hand in hand. As I have already said, in terms of format and content, the dream he narrated to me would not have been out of place in the manuals of Ibn Abī al-Dunyā. There, for example, we read of a pious man who was kept from entering paradise because he had borrowed a needle and forgotten to return it before his death, so he appeared to a descendant and asked to have this matter settled (Kinberg 1986: 306). In both cases, a dead relative visits a descendant to transmit a message and to ask for action, which is both necessary for the purpose of the salvation of the dead person and a basic imperative of Islamic ethics. It is strongly implied that the living have a responsibility to act on behalf of the dead to save them from being locked into their graves forever. Upon receiving the message, the living person acts in accordance with the dead’s wishes and is rewarded by a second dream, where the veracity of the first dream and its interpretation is confirmed. It is in no way controversial to settle debts, but

12 For example, see the dream manual by Shaykhs Abū ‘Ubaydah and Abū Talhah (2009) published by Salafi Minhaj, and Edgar and De Looijer 2017: 149–150 for a discussion of this manual. I am grateful to Zoltan Pall for drawing my attention to this diversity among Salafis in their understanding of dreams.

the problem is that, from the modernist standpoint, the boundary between this world and the realm of *barzakh* is completely impermeable. In Pak Agus' story we thus encounter the rather paradoxical situation that he, and reportedly his uncle, rejected the idea of any permeability as "whatever," even as the uncle did receive relevant information and acted on it precisely because of this "whatever." If ambiguity arises when "two contrary, or at least competing, clearly different meanings are associated with one and the same term, act, or object" (Bauer 2021: 10), Pak Agus' story seems to be precisely that. Neither was his experience unique, as we will see shortly, pointing to a broader "culture of ambiguity" rather than an isolated incident. And yet, Pak Agus would be unlikely to understand his own experience as "ambiguous." How, then, should we conceptualize it?

2 A Subjective Experience

Instead of talking about the realm of *barzakh* or the imaginary, another one of my regular interlocutors offered me a different conceptual vocabulary to talk about the ambiguities of modernist dream interpretations. He was an elderly man and the leader of one of Yogyakarta's Muhammadiyah mosques. A stern person, he was impatient and uncompromising with anything he considered un-Islamic – which were most things, according to him. Among the favorite topics of this man – I will call him Pak Jazir – was the question of how graves were supposed to look. The appearance of graves is another identity marker of traditionalist and modernist Islam in Indonesia. Traditionalists like structures on graves that are often lovingly decorated, whereas modernists insist that only a small headstone is allowed.¹³ Pak Jazir often made fun of those traditionalists who came to graves because they believed in the possibility of communicating with the dead. In his mind, this was no more than a silly superstition. I was all the more surprised when one day he related to me a memory that he prefaced as a "subjective" (I. *subjektif*) experience. He smiled as he said the words. Pak Jazir did not often smile and, when he did, it was usually in quiet amusement over other people's foolishness. But here, the small, slightly ironic smile was directed at himself, as though he was making fun of himself for telling me something quite so irrational.

His father had died and was buried. As is customary on many graveyards in Muhammadiyah neighborhoods, after five years his body was considered to

13 For more on the debates around gravestones in Indonesia, see Keane 2022; Meyer 2024. For similar debates in the wider Islamic world, see Beránek and Ťupek 2018; Ho 2006.

have sufficiently decayed and the plot was used for the burial of a new person. Pak Jazir said that he knew the family whose deceased member was buried in what had been his father's plot. They were Muhammadiyah people. Giving the grave away was not a problem for him. After all, he said, according to Islamic law, graves should not be permanent. A grave was just a hole with decomposing bones. And once the bones had decomposed, a grave could be freely given to the next person. So, all of this was in good order – but there was a different issue: shortly after the new person was buried, Pak Jazir discovered that a monument had been built on top of the grave; not too big, but big enough to be completely unacceptable in his eyes.¹⁴ And apparently, he was not the only one to find it quite so objectionable, because soon after, his father appeared to him in a dream. His face, Pak Jazir said, was red, as though he was angry. Pak Jazir immediately concluded that his father's anger had to do with the monument, that his father was in distress because of this un-Islamic feature on top of his grave. Since the grave was no longer his father's, there was nothing Pak Jazir could do himself to have the offensive structure removed. But since he knew the family of the grave's new resident, he decided to pay them a visit. As he told the story, it turned out that the family had not even known about this monument. They claimed to have had nothing to do with its construction and were in fact appalled to hear about it. The widow of the deceased blamed the caretaker of the cemetery for having taken illicit liberties and promptly had the offensive structure removed. The problem was resolved. Reiterating what he had previously said, Pak Jazir reminded me that this whole story was no more than a subjective experience.

Pak Jazir's account of his dream is in some ways quite similar to Pak Agus'. In both cases, the deceased father of the living person has knowledge of the happenings of this world and is experiencing distress because of the actions of the living. In both cases, the living act in accordance with the dead's wishes and thereby resolve the problem. And crucially, in both cases, even as the dreamer does as the dead person wishes, the veridical value and the mere possibility of meeting the dead in a dream is denied. In the case of Pak Jazir, another level of ambiguity is added because of the contradictory status of the grave: on the one hand, graves are not permanent and once the dead person has decomposed, nothing is left and the grave can be given to someone else – and yet, on

14 Many modernist and Salafi groups observe the rule that graves must not be higher than a hand span, citing a Prophetic hadith transmitted by Bukhārī, according to which the Prophet's grave was "humped" (Bukhārī n.d.: 5:168). For a Muhammadiyah fatwa on this matter, see Majelis Tarjih dan Tajdid 2020.

the other hand, Pak Jazir's father was in distress because "his" grave had been disfigured by a monument.

It is important to recognize yet another parallel between Pak Jazir and Pak Agus. Both of them have a privileged status as men with high seniority in the organization. A woman, a young person, or someone with less social clout would not be likely to get away with such an ambiguous statement, or risk being immediately suspected of not being "truly" modernist, of being secretly on the side of "whatever" and "the subjective" after all. The hierarchies in play here are different from the ideological hierarchies that arise when conflicting truths are integrated into the same framework, but are assigned different rankings in this framework, as we see in the Introduction (Alatas and Slama 2026) and Teren Sevea's (2026) article in this special issue. Here, the question of who gets to make use of ambiguity is already a matter of hierarchies. But these gendered and other forms of privilege also mean that people with a higher degree of visibility, who are used to speaking on behalf of the organization, get to make use of ambiguity, thus coloring understandings of modernist Islam more broadly.

While Pak Agus did not want to associate dreams with "whatever," Pak Jazir, with an ironic smile, called it a "subjective experience." His self-deprecating humor rings familiar against the background of other studies of Indonesian Islam, in which scholars have shown that Islamic sociality and negotiations of relations between different groups and distinct Islamic identities often make use of jokes and laughter (Hefner 2019; Hoesterey 2021; Ibrahim 2018). Going further, Daniel Birchok (2022) has recently argued that humor allows his Muslim interlocutors in Aceh to explore the boundaries between transcendence and immanence. Pak Jazir's ironic smile seemed to accomplish something similar. By making fun of his own story, he effectively undercut any certainty about whether or not he was serious, whether he believed that he had received a message from his father, and that the dream was hence veridical, in spite of the fact that it cuts against several key tenets Muhammadiyah is known to promote.

This performance of uncertainty is further amplified by Pak Jazir's use of the word "subjective." In the everyday usage of the term, the "subjective" is implicitly contrasted with its opposite, "objective." Pak Jazir seems to concede that "objectively" speaking, a dream like this is nonsense, but simultaneously claims that it has "subjective" truth and value. This reference to a "subjective" truth does not map clearly onto any particular concept in traditional Islamic theological discourse, but the binary between the subjective and the objective does have certain resonances with a conceptual pair that we primarily know from Sufi thought – namely, the interior or *batin* (from A. *bāṭin*), which is juxtaposed to the exterior or *lahir* (from A. *ẓāhir*). *Lahir* and *batin* circumscribe

ways of experiencing reality or epistemic registers, where the *lahir* is concerned with external matters such as causality or knowledge of the facts of tradition and history, and the *batin* grasps truths that are irreducible to matters of causality or empirical knowledge. In Sufi discourse, the *lahir* and the *batin* are often understood to be both the same and different. They are the same because they point toward the same truth and devotion, and because the external is the vehicle for the internal (Bashir 2011). Sometimes, however, the *batin* is conceptualized as constituting a deeper level of insight and truth than the *lahir*. In such cases, the two can become opposed to each other because their diverging epistemic foundations make them unintelligible to each other. The most extreme case of such a simultaneous divergence and convergence of the *lahir* and the *batin* can be found in antinomian or transgressive Sufism, where breaking certain tenets of shari'a law is understood as the expression of an especially deep understanding of and love for the divine (see, for instance, Acrit et al. 2024; Ewing 2021; Karamustafa 1994). To cite Shahab Ahmed, "Sufi experiential knowledge of Truth is profoundly personal and internal and is experienced by the subjective Self within and of itself as the ultimate locus of the Sufi hermeneutical engagement with the Truth of the Unseen," which may then give "rise to the historically recurrent social tension between the discourse and practice of Sufism and the discourse and practice of Islamic law" (2016: 353). The Sufi understanding of subjectivity Ahmed describes is not individualistic but rather the experience of the Truth of the Unseen, which is ontologically independent of the experiencing self, even if this differentiation becomes fundamentally destabilized in the moment of the experience. For Ahmed, the tension between Sufism and Islamic law is the direct consequence of what he calls the multi-dimensionality of the Qur'an (Ahmed 2015: 363–368), which resulted in a polyvalence of truth and meaning in Islam – at least until about 1800. By letting his analysis end there, he implicitly concurs with Bauer that, after this time, Muslims' tolerance for ambiguity gradually diminished.

It is striking that Ahmed uses the same term that Pak Jazir used – "subjective" – although I do not wish to suggest that there is no meaningful difference between Pak Jazir's and Shahab Ahmed's use of the term. Neither do I mean to imply that Pak Jazir is a closeted Sufi, especially because he himself would certainly object to being anything of the sort. In fact, irrespective of whether his choice of the term "subjektif" was completely conscious and deliberate, at least it was very characteristic of the identity politics practiced within Muhammadiyah. It is also telling that Pak Jazir used an English loan word, a practice common in Muhammadiyah discourse since Indonesian independence, replacing Dutch as an identity marker of their modern and progressive attitude. I did not ask at the time; but if I had, my guess is that Pak Jazir

would have said that *subjektif* is not like *batin* because *batin* is what traditionalists and Sufis do. He may have invoked other conceptual differences as well, but since neither of the two concepts are fixed or stable, what was at stake was constructing a difference through his choice of words. His renaming was a kind of performative practice in J. L. Austin's (1975) sense, because the choice of terminology clearly marks and performs a difference from other kinds of Muslims. It could even be understood as a kind of ritual with a subjunctive aspect that scholars of rituals have discussed, where an action creates a shared world that is always at least potentially in tension with the world of daily experience (Seligman et al. 2008: 25–26).

Like rituals, these renaming practices are not isolated incidences but are repeated and regularized, contributing to a broader culture of ambiguity. Indeed, I encountered many such examples during my fieldwork. To give another one, some Muhammadiyah friends of mine took me to a graveyard a week or so before the beginning of Ramadan, to clean the graves and have a meal together; a practice they told me was most definitely not *nyadran*. *Nyadran*, a Javanese expression, denotes a ritual that is normally associated with traditionalism, and which also entails cleaning graves right before the beginning of the fasting month. So, what we were doing was not *nyadran*, but rather “cleaning graves” (J. *besik makam*). When I asked what the difference was, they simply said that *nyadran* was what traditionalists do. When pressed about what that meant in practice, they were not so sure about specifics because they had never participated in a traditionalist *nyadran*, but then ended up invoking some common talking points about how *nyadran* probably entailed praying to the people in the grave – a typical modernist stereotype of traditionalists – whereas *besik makam* was about showing respect and building community. Perhaps *nyadran* looks the same as *besik makam*, but because it is renamed and claimed as a modernist practice, it is different, just like *batin* is different from *subjektif*.

In spite of this clearly constructed difference, there are parallels in the conceptualizations of *batin* and *subjektif* that point to a shared understanding that truth has more than one dimension. Like the *batin*, Pak Jazir seemed to suggest that the *subjektif* was irreducible and possibly even in an oppositional relationship to the objective truths he likewise acknowledged to be valid. His act of renaming and laughter played with the sameness and difference of concepts in a way not so different from the artistic enactments of ambiguity in literary works written in languages including Arabic, Javanese, and Malay, which allowed for the articulation of complex and ineffable theological insights (Meyer 2019), expressions of perplexity (Florida 2019), and a training in ambiguity by producing it in a playful manner (Bauer 2021: 151–182). Likewise, my

modernist Muslim interlocutors play with ambiguity through renaming and laughter and, in so doing, also explore transcendent truths and values. They do not reject their modernist epistemologies, but find places for multivalence in what seems like a rigid structure. And their laughter signals that this is not an unnoticed contradiction or an unconscious tension, but they know and communicate more than they are able to explain in their nevertheless valid categories.

3 Conclusion

Thinking about ambiguity in relation to the dream stories I encountered during my field research among Muhammadiyah modernists, I find that there are two points that stand out. The first is that the capacity for being able to tolerate the coexistence of different and even mutually exclusive truths does not seem to have altogether disappeared with modernity; it is alive and well among self-identified modernists, like the Muhammadiyah community where I conducted my research – or at least among their elites, who to some extent get to speak on behalf of the organization as a whole. And the second is that, at the same time, the way in which this tolerance for ambiguity has been conceptualized among these modernist Muslims has changed considerably. Premodern Muslims and contemporary traditionalists made sense of the world in terms that have lent themselves to analytical categories such as Ahmed's spatiality of revelation or Bauer's ambiguity, or to talking about the *khayāl* as an intermediate realm between pure being and the phenomenal world, or the *batin* as simultaneously the same and not the same as the *lahir*. Modernist Muslims in Muhammadiyah would likely not recognize themselves in Bauer's representations of the premodern tolerance of ambiguity in Islam. They have, by and large, left behind this conceptual vocabulary, referring to their ambiguous experiences instead as *subjektif* or other categories that invoke modern epistemologies and disciplinary enforcements of rational coherence. But does this really mean that there is an inherent difference between traditional and modern engagements with the coexistence of multiple truths?

According to Bauer's conceptual vocabulary, ambiguity is distinct from ambivalence, with the latter being a psychological state of discomfort or feeling "not all right in oneself" (2021: 18). We also know the concept of ambivalence from anti-Asadian anthropologies of Islam, including Samuli Schielke's, who understands it as a break with a normative social order and the ideal of pious self-cultivation (Schielke 2010, 2015). Perhaps it might be argued that modernist ambiguities are ultimately no more than ambivalences, failures to

fully conform to a self-imposed worldview. But how can we really differentiate between one and the other? When Bauer writes that the West's intolerance of ambiguity and ambition of universalizing its epistemes among non-Western cultures more tolerant of ambiguity has resulted in "contradictions" that have no prospect of ever being resolved (Bauer 2021: 184), his point about the epistemic violence of colonial and postcolonial power-knowledge complexes is completely valid – but we may ask ourselves why only some contradictions are legible to us as generative ambiguities, while others represent discursive limitations and dead ends.

If we understand the tolerance of ambiguity as the capacity to seek out and make productive use of situations of novelty, complexity, and insolubility (Bauer 2021: 17), it turns out that my modernist interlocutors do not just tolerate ambiguity – they are themselves experts in deploying ambiguity, for example, through simultaneous acceptance and rejection of veridical dreams, renaming practices, and humor. These strategies open up the possibility to play with multiple truths at the same time, while still keeping up the airs of mocking and disavowing familiar understandings of ambiguity and multivalence as traditionalist and Sufi. If we immediately discount these processes as the confused ambivalence of postcolonial subjects, it may have more to do with the pervasive prejudice in Islamic studies that considers modernist Islam as inauthentic and theologically shallow while celebrating traditionalism and especially Sufism as the true locus of Islamic authenticity (for a critique, see Osella and Osella 2008).

Of course, this does not mean that all Islamic orientations are inherently the same. The fact that modernist Muslims often disavow Sufi or traditionalist conceptualizations of ambiguity does show that they perform their ideological difference from these groups in the ambiguities they practice. In Pak Jazir's example, the process of reconceptualizing the tensions that arise at the intersection between the inner and the outer dimension of Islam, one of the building blocks of Islam's traditional embrace of multivalence, allows him as a self-consciously modernist Muslim to retain the practice of ambiguity, albeit by another name. Pak Agus, though less explicitly, seemed to be doing something very similar. For him, associating dreams with "whatever" was, of course, nonsense, but that did not need to keep anybody from acting as though it were not. I am not trying to claim that my modernist interlocutors are not actually modern, that they just believe themselves to be modern but in fact continue to be premodern, as Latour (2002) claimed was the case more broadly. Indeed, I do not think there is such a thing as a pre-ideological category of the modern. For this reason it is especially important that we, as scholars, are mindful that our analytical categories and conceptualizations can take on a life of their own on the ground, and that

they are not static or neutral but ideologically significant, situationally contingent, and contested – and that we therefore need to make sure to differentiate between ambiguity as an identity marker and a lived practice.

Ultimately, I suggest that the preceding discussions raise the question if it is really meaningful to talk about whether – or until when – Islam has tolerated ambiguity. Instead, I think we should take Bauer by his word when he calls for “a more differentiated perception of the Islamic world” (2021: 149). But this differentiated perception has to extend to modern times and modernist Muslims as well, as their complex positionalities likewise deserve our attention as to how they construct, conceptualize, and deal with ambiguity in different, shifting, and sometimes seemingly contradictory ways.

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