

## Digital Theology: Sainly Marvels and God-talk on Facebook

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### Abstract:

*Among Indonesia's traditionalist Muslims, anecdotes of saintly marvels (karāma) relating occurrences that contradict reason or human understanding of nature are lodged in everyday conversations. While scholars have noted how recounting and listening to karāma anecdotes is believed by Muslims to transmit the blessing (baraka) of the saints and facilitate their intercession, this article explores such anecdotes' capacity to engender conversations about God and other issues pertaining to religious belief. It does so by observing the circulation of karāma anecdotes among Indonesia's traditionalist Muslims on Facebook and their role in provoking a variety of God-talk. The circulation of such anecdotes affords their publics with the ability to assent to, engage with, debate, and question theological propositions. Facebook creates the material preconditions for the production and circulation of accessible and shareable karāma anecdotes that enables Muslims beyond the scholastic elites to participate in theological discussion and reflection while facilitating digital practices that can be construed as theologically meaningful. It also facilitates various disputations, including those that are theological, between Muslims adhering to different Islamic currents. Far from simply being a channel of communication or a mode of dissemination, Facebook may indeed come to function as a digital infrastructure of theology.*

### Keywords:

*Islam, Theology, Facebook, karāma, Indonesia*

The praise for the Prophet sung by the muezzin of a nearby mosque made me realize that the time for the dawn prayer was less than an hour away. There were five of us that night, all men, chatting in the patio of Ali's

house that overlooks a small garden where a sturdy but fruitless mango tree stands. The voice of the muezzin did not deter our natural storyteller friend, Alvin, from recounting an anecdote of saintly marvel (*karāma*) that he had read on Facebook involving a Moroccan saint who was able to miraculously summon water to rise from the depth of a well, needing neither rope nor bucket. It was one of the many *karāma* anecdotes exchanged that night. “It is quite ironic,” I said as Alvin concluded the anecdote, “that we have passed the entire night drinking coffee and conversing about saints without trying to emulate them as if they were mere characters from a Marvel comic book.” Alvin did not say a word, opting instead to empty the ashtray that was crammed with peanut husks and cigarette butts. “Aren’t we supposed to spend the night in prayers and contemplating the divine just like those saints?” I asked. Upon hearing my self-righteous question, Ahmad – who had spent many years studying in a Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) – put down his cigarette and said: “Haven’t we been contemplating the Almighty? We have been talking about the reality of saints and their *karāma*. That is *dhikrullāh* (remembrance of God)!”

The foregoing vignette comes from one of the many nocturnal get-togethers that I attended during my fieldwork in Pekalongan, Central Java (2011–13). I frequented such laidback gatherings to unwind and have a good laugh, although they often turn to be an invaluable learning experience. The folks I was hanging out with are usually described as traditionalist Muslims, although they themselves prefer the term *nahdliyin*, referring to the *Nahdlatul ‘Ulama* (NU), Indonesia’s premier traditionalist Islamic organization that they identify with. *Nahdliyin* generally follow the teachings of contemporary and past scholars and saints instead of resorting to independent reasoning in religious matters. They recognize the importance of Sufism and are enthusiasts of public religious rituals like the ritual recitation of the Prophet’s nativity story (*mawlid*) and commemoration of scholars–saints (*ḥawl*). They believe in the intercessory power of saints and are actively seeking their intercession by visiting their graves and reciting or listening to stories of their *karāma*. Indeed, among *nahdliyin*, *karāma* anecdotes are lodged in everyday conversations. Privileging the marvels of the saints over their biographies, such anecdotes relate occurrences that contradict reason

or human understanding of nature (*khāriq al-‘āda*). The short anecdotal form that such narratives take has “a relation to the patterns employed in naturally occurring conversation” (Millie 2008, 44), which explains their smooth circulation across multiple conversational contexts. While scholars have noted how reciting, recounting, or listening to *karāma* anecdotes is believed by Muslims to transmit the blessing (*baraka*) of the saints and facilitate their intercession (Millie 2008; Millie 2009; Gilsean 1973; Ewing 1997), Ahmad’s response to my question made me aware of another, less-discussed, significance of *karāma* anecdotes for my *nahdliyin* friends, one that can be described as *theological*. By theology, I simply mean “God-talk in all its forms” (Chittick 2008, 221). William Chittick’s capacious definition of theology is analytically useful as it allows us to think about the myriad forms that theological discourse can take, from the most explicit, authoritative, and formulaic like creeds (‘*aqā’id*, sing. ‘*aqīda*), to a range of scholastic treatises on formal theology (‘*ilm al-kalām*), Sufism, and Qur’ānic exegesis, to those that are informal, less-scholarly, and even unregulated by any established religious authority. The theological significance of *karāma* anecdotes lies in their ability to engender conversations and debates about God and other issues pertaining to religious belief.

This article observes the latest stage in the long-established circulation of *karāma* anecdotes among Indonesian Muslims, one that unfolds on Facebook, to explore their roles in provoking a variety of God-talk and engendering digital theological practice. Similar to their offline circulation, the dissemination of *karāma* anecdotes on Facebook affords Muslims the opportunity to engage, debate, and assent to theological propositions. In following the circulation of *karāma* anecdotes on Facebook, the article foregrounds “connection and interrelation between online and offline religious contexts” (Campbell and Evolvi 2019, 6) while exploring how older religious practice is reproduced and reconfigured through practices of mediatization. As a digital infrastructure, Facebook creates the material preconditions for the (re)production and circulation of accessible and shareable *karāma* anecdotes, while opening up the possibility for Muslims to assent (*taṣḍīq*), question, or deny the veracity of such stories or the reality of *karāma* that they illustrate. Moreover, Facebook facilitates

heterosocial discussion and disputations between Muslims with different religious orientations. Consequently, Facebook should not be treated simply as a channel of communication or a mode of dissemination, and instead, may come to function as *a digital infrastructure of theology*.

Scholars of religion and the media have drawn attention to how increasing dependency on commodified media forms assimilates religion into their logics and modes of existence (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996; Eickelman and Anderson 1999; Roy 2004). Such a view reflects a genealogy of thought – exemplified by the works of Walter Benjamin, Marshall McLuhan, and Benedict Anderson – that attributes to media the power to reconstitute individual sensibilities and communal belonging in ways that are different from religion. Other scholars are more cautious about contrasting religion and media (Anderson 1999; Meyer and Moors 2006; Dasgupta 2005). Recent anthropological works on religion and media have stressed either the importance of comprehending religion *as* mediation inseparable from technological artifice (De Vries 2001, 28; see also Engelke 2010, 371) or the need to study how actors utilize the media as part of religious practice (Eisenlohr 2009; Engelke 2010; Hirschkind 2006; Hirschkind 2011; Meyer 2009; Stolow 2005). Several recent works on Islam and (social) media in Southeast Asia have also shown how new technologies and forms of mediation are reconfigured by established religious practice. Instead of positing the development of new media as inevitably detrimental to religion and religious sociality, these works invite us to observe how religious actors use and reshape different media forms as part of changing religious practice.<sup>1</sup>

Theology, like other religious discourse and practice, takes shape through a “materializing process,” which means that it “must be concretized through material mediation” (Zito 2008, 81). This entails that material mediation should not be seen as distinct from but rather as the condition for theology. The media should not be analytically separated from theology, as theological discourse and practice presuppose a mediatic structure. This entails that a social media platform like Facebook does not necessarily absorb theology and transform it in accordance with its own commodified modes of functioning. As will be shown in this article, new

technologies and novel forms of mediation may themselves be transfigured by older theological practice into infrastructures of theology.

### What is *Karāma*?

It is perhaps proper to begin with the notion of *karāma* (Ind. *keramat*). According to the 14th–15th century *Sunni* theologian and lexicographer ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Jurjānī (d. 1413),

*karāma* is the appearance of something that annuls the customary way of things (*amr khāriq li-l-‘āda*) on behalf of someone without concomitant claim to prophethood. If it is not accompanied by faith (*īmān*) and pious deeds, it is called a deception (*istidrāj*). If it is accompanied by the claim to prophethood, it is called a miracle (*mu‘jiza*). (al-Jurjānī 2004, 154)

In simpler terms: *karāma* is a supernatural occurrence divinely bestowed on individuals who are faithful, pious, and do not claim to be prophets. *Karāma* is posited as different from prophetic miracles and from natural wonders or oddities, the latter of which is usually referred to as ‘*ajā’ib*’ (Ind. *ajaib–keajaiban*). What makes *karāma* different from the fanciful ‘*ajā’ib*’ is the theological framing of the former. *Karāma* serves to attract their spectators not to the marvelous occurrences themselves but to Divine omnipotence, together with the admirable and imitable lives of the pious individuals associated with those supernatural phenomena.

Apart from Ahmad, whose remark about listening to *karāma* anecdotes as remembrance of God (*dhikrullāh*) opens this article, another person who made me realize the theological significance of *karāma* anecdotes was the contemporary *nahdliyin* scholar and Sufi master, Habib Luthfi Bin Yahya (b. 1947). One Ramaḍān morning in 2011, I attended Habib Luthfi’s class on Qur’ānic exegesis in which the Sufi master described the theological motive of *karāma*. “Without *karāma*,” Habib Luthfi explained,

faith (*iman*) can wear off (*luntur*). How so? Because without it, they can then ask, “is it true that the Prophet can resurrect the dead?” and so on. After hearing and reading about how saints perform *karāma*, Muslims can assent (*tasdīq*) to the truth of the prophetic miracles. If mere saints can do such extraordinary things, prophets can undoubtedly do much more. So *karāma* anecdotes help strengthen our faith in the Qur’ān. They show that Allāh continues to help his friends just as He once assisted the prophets, as told in the Qur’ān.

For Habib Luthfi, *karāma* anecdotes allow their publics to assent (*taṣḍīq*) to the theological propositions they concretized. Central to Habib Luthfi’s discussion is a conception of faith (*īmān*) as personal *recognition of, and engagement with something knowable* (Smith 1979, 111). “Faith increases and decreases (*iman itu naik turun*),” as Habib Luthfi repeatedly says, quoting a Prophetic *ḥadīth*. It requires maintenance by continuous *taṣḍīq* to what has become known. Insofar as *taṣḍīq* involves recognition of something knowable, however, that which is knowable must have some material manifestation that makes it available to perception (Keane 2008, 114).

Muslim philosophers have discussed the role of materiality in facilitating *taṣḍīq*. The medieval Arab philosopher Abū Naṣr al-Farābī (d. 950), for example, explains that both philosophy and religion provide accounts of the same reality. Whereas philosophy does so through demonstrative methods that produce intelligible (*ma’qūlāt*) accessible only to the trained, religion presents accounts of reality “by means of their similitudes taken from corporeal principles” (al-Farābī 1995, 90). Religion involves *takhyīl* – which I gloss here as *creative imagination* – that concretizes concepts, thereby rendering them accessible to the multitude. *Takhyīl* imitates, imprints, and presents concepts and propositions as perceivable imaginal products (*takhayyul*, pl. *takhayyulāt*) to render them communicable and sensorily available for *taṣḍīq*. One goal of *takhyīl* is to facilitate *taṣḍīq* to truths that otherwise are not available to the senses (Black 1990, 72–74, 180–208).

*Takhyīl* materializes theological propositions (like “God protects the righteous” (Qur’ān 7:196)). As products of *takhyīl*, *karāma* anecdotes serve

as communicable illustrations of divine existence, together with God's assistance, protection, and care for the righteous. They serve to help people envisage reality differently, in ways that expand what is usually regarded as commonsensical. They provide their publics with particular templates that enable them to imagine God's participation in the world while challenging them to assent to the theological propositions they concretize. Nevertheless, *karāma* anecdotes are public entities that are relatively autonomous from inferences and open to different interpretations. As publicly available semiotic forms, there is nothing to guarantee that such anecdote "will produce identical interpretations or experiences across time or between persons" (Keane 2008, 114). This means that for *karāma* anecdotes to be taken as evidence of a particular theology, there has to be a kind of regimentation that renders them recognizable and meaningful as such. To become theologically useful, such anecdotes need other forms of God-talk to frame them, like formal theologies (*'ilm al-kalām*) and creeds (*'aqīda*) that provide basic conceptions about God and how he functions in the world.<sup>2</sup>

### Transmitting *Karāma* anecdotes

"How does one assent to the reality of *karāma*?" I asked Habib Luthfi in one of our many conversations. His reply was short and straightforward. *Taşdīq*, he explained, could be as simple as talking about *karāma*. The Sufi master's response seems to suggest that speaking is believing (Harding 2000). Participating in the transmission of *karāma* anecdotes or responding to them positively already constitutes *taşdīq* to the reality of *karāma*. Habib Luthfi's response was similar to that which I got from Ahmad during one of our nocturnal get-togethers. Both Ahmad and Habib Luthfi seemingly suggest that talking about *karāma* is, in itself, understood as a theological practice, a form of God-talk. This realization has helped me to partly understand – aside from the question of *baraka* or intercession – why my *nahdliyin* friends enthusiastically reproduce, transmit, and listen to *karāma* anecdotes. It is no surprise that ever since Facebook became popular in Indonesia, the social media platform has been used to reproduce such anecdotes.

Take Toha, for example. Like Ahmad, Toha is a *pesantren* graduate who often

joined our nighttime gatherings. Unlike Ahmad, however, Toha maintains an active social media presence. His frequent posts on Facebook relate to various contemporary issues, from Indonesian politics and economy to discussion of classical Islamic texts that he learned in the *pesantren*. Owing to his social media activity, Toha has garnered more than 23 thousand Facebook followers. Along with his avidity for commenting on current affairs, Toha is a keen disseminator of *karāma* anecdotes. The following is Toha's Facebook post from January 30, 2020:

The *karāma* of the mother of *Kyai* Maksum Jauhari of *Pesantren* Lirboyo.

One day she called an electrician to fix a circuit problem in her house. Arriving without his toolbox, the electrician asked for her permission to go and get his tools. She, however, insisted that he fix the wires with his bare hands. *Subḥannallāh* [glory be to God], he was able to do so without experiencing any electric shock. The electrician was so elated that when he went back to his office, he tried again. This time, however, he was electrocuted and fainted. The electrician finally realized that his ability to fix the wires with his bare hands was due to the *karāma* of the mother of *Kyai* Maksum. (As told by K. H. Adibus Solih b. K. H. Anwar Mansur and quoted from the Facebook post of Rashid).

Toha's Facebook post received 455 likes and was shared by 64 people. Prior to Toha's posting, the *karāma* anecdote already had a public life. As Toha himself was not a witness to the event, he mentions the anecdote's chain of transmission or *isnād*. The short *isnād* clarifies that Toha read the anecdote on the wall of Rashid's Facebook. Rashid, in turn, heard the story from K. H. Adibus Solih, the son of K. H. Anwar Mansur, one of the scholars of *pesantren* Lirboyo and the nephew of the saintly woman. Modeled on the transmission of Prophetic *ḥadīth*, the *isnād* functions to safeguard the authenticity of a narration. It serves to inform the reader that the anecdote is not Toha's invention. Toha's role is simply that of a transmitter. By including the *isnād* – which in this case involves not only oral but also Facebook



transmission – Toha follows an established model of narration, one that can be found in classical Sufi hagiographies. By sharing the story on Facebook, both Rashid and Toha are performing *taṣḍīq*. They are assenting to the veracity of the anecdote – and the reality of *karāma* – by reproducing and extending its public life.

Texts and utterances are *communicable* (Briggs 2007). They “represent their own points of origin, modes of circulation, intended audiences, and modes of reception” (Briggs 2007, 556). Textual communicability achieves effects as people respond to the ways that the texts seek to interpellate them. Of course, there are various possible responses, including actors’ refusal to locate themselves in the position being offered, their revision of the position being offered, or their rejection of interpellation altogether. In this sense, *taṣḍīq* involves yielding to the communicable cartography of *karāma* anecdotes, allowing oneself to be interpellated by them into one of the available discursive capacities that can aid their reproduction. One can also perform *taṣḍīq* by simply liking or loving the *karāma* posts – two functions provided by Facebook – as to do so is to let oneself be interpellated by the anecdotes to occupy the place of their consumers who responds positively. Of course, one can simply read or ignore the posted anecdotes without ever engaging with them. To do so may be construed as a refusal to occupy any position offered by the anecdotes.

Another form of engagement is to actually respond to the anecdotes. Most of the comments on Toha’s post, for example, consist of simple religious phrase like “praise be to God (*alḥamdulillāh*),” “glory be to God (*subḥānāllāh*),” or “*alfātiḥa*,” the last of which denotes reciting the first *sūra* of the Qur’ān for the spirit of the saintly woman. Such comments may consist of formulaic religious phrases. But when understood through the prism of theological practice, they can be understood as *taṣḍīq* to the reality of the *karāma*, which entails assenting to (1) God’s omnipotence, including his ability to suspend natural order on behalf of certain individuals; and (2) the sanctity of the mother of *Kyai* Maksum Jauhari.

As they travel online or offline, *karāma* anecdotes create positions and recruit actors to occupy them, whether as translators, disseminators, readers, or listeners. Access to such positions, however, is not evenly distributed. An Indonesian literate in Arabic would have access to the treasure trove of hagiographical texts or Facebook posts not available to those without such a linguistic competency. This allows her to occupy the position of translators of *karāma* anecdotes. As a *pesantren* graduate literate in Arabic, for example, Toha has been translating *karāma* anecdotes from Arabic hagiographical texts or from the Facebook page of Arab scholars. Similarly, a person who has access to a living saint or Sufi master or has witnessed a supernatural occurrence can also assume the role of an author of *karāma* anecdotes. Thus, another *nahdliyin* Facebook user, Nur, was jubilant as he publicly declares, in his February 23, 2020 post, that God has finally granted him “the opportunity to personally experience the *karāma* of Habib Abdul Qodir Bilfagih.” In his post, Nur recounts how he was determined to attend the annual commemoration of Bilfagih’s death in Malang, East Java, though he could only find a seat for a flight that leaves Jakarta several hours before the event. On his way to the airport, Nur was stuck in traffic, and he knew that he would not arrive on time to catch the flight. He told the driver to keep on driving to the airport because he wanted to try his luck. En route, Nur did not stop praying to God and petitioning Bilfagih’s spirit to intercede. When he arrived at the airport, he discovered that his flight had been delayed and he was able to attend the commemoration. “I have always heard and shared stories of saintly *karāma*, but today I have experienced it myself, all praise to Allāh,” Nur concludes his post. From being a consumer and disseminator of *karāma* anecdotes, Nur has finally become an author.

Significantly, Facebook has added new measures of *taṣḍīq*. For example, Facebook differentiates between liking and loving a post by providing different emoticons to express them. To love a post is usually considered more intense than to simply liking it. Some people like a *karāma* anecdote post while adding comments that further intensify their engagement with the anecdote. Facebook also allows users to share the anecdote they read on other people’s walls. This last function allows readers of the anecdote to transform their roles from consumers to disseminators or co-producers.

In the latter role, people are able to use Facebook to prolong the anecdote's public life and extend its communicability. As a digital infrastructure, Facebook thus allows different kinds of engagement, from the simplest to the more intense, which are then construed by my *nahdliyin* friends as degrees of *taṣdīq*. In this sense, one cannot simply posit Facebook as a platform of dissemination. By using Facebook for *takhyīl* and *taṣdīq*, *nahdliyin* like Toha, Rashid, and Nur, together with those who like, love, respond to, and share their *karāma* posts transfigure the social media platform into a digital infrastructure of theology. Concurrently, by introducing different forms of digital engagement with such posts, Facebook has also reconfigured the old theological practice of *taṣdīq*.

### Refusing *taṣdīq*

Being imaginal products, *karāma* anecdotes can be deemed excessive by some people, leading to their veracity being questioned. Refusing to accept the veracity of a *karāma* anecdote, however, is not always synonymous with denying the reality of *karāma*. One may deny an anecdote for lack of clear provenance (hence the importance of *isnād*) or simply because one does not think that the people featured in the story deserve the divine gift of *karāma*. In the thriving religious marketplace of contemporary Indonesia, people often refuse to assent to the veracity of a *karāma* anecdote simply because it features individuals representing different Islamic orientations or organizations. *Nahdliyin*, for example, often ridicule *karāma* anecdotes featuring, or disseminated by, those from Wahhabī or Salafī circles. In such cases, the refusal to assent is not equivalent to a denial of the theological propositions that those imaginal products illustrate. To clarify this point, I turn to another post by my *karāma* enthusiastic friend Toha.

In mid-March 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, eight thousand people from across Southeast Asia made their way to Gowa (South Sulawesi) to attend the annual gathering (*ijtima'*) of the global Islamic revivalist movement Tablighi Jama'at. The gathering was scheduled to begin on March 19 but was canceled at the eleventh hour due to pressure from the authorities. The holding of such a large gathering in the time of

corona became a *cause célèbre* in Indonesia before making its way to the pages of *The New York Times* and *The Economist*. Indonesian netizens condemned and mocked the Tablighis on Facebook and Twitter for their reckless behavior. Indeed, subsequent reports indicate that Tablighis, who were forcefully repatriated to their homes from Gowa, “went on to infect more than 1,000 people from 22 (out of 34) different provinces” (The Economist 2020). Under vitriolic attacks from all sides, some Tablighis who attended the gathering utilized different social media platforms to upload videos showing their healthy condition while stressing that God will always protect the righteous.

It was in response to this that Toha composed his April 29, 2020, Facebook post. He quoted several media reports to show that many attendees of the canceled gathering had become carriers by the time they arrived in their hometowns. He then wrote,

The lesson from this is that one should never assume that piety or good deeds will make us invincible from diseases or other dangers. The world works according to the law of nature. *Karāma* is an interruption of the law of nature [*hukum alam*] that only happens once in every billion cases. To think that one is under God’s protection [*al-himāya*] from physical and spiritual dangers is the gateway to destruction.

Here is a post by someone who otherwise can be fairly described as a keen reproducer of *karāma* anecdotes. This post suggests that being a firm believer in the reality of *karāma* does not necessarily entail denying the laws of nature. One can be a dedicated believer of *karāma*, who frequently renews one’s *taṣḍīq* by reproducing *karāma* anecdotes while being simultaneously committed to the notion of the laws of nature or to modern science. The two are not mutually exclusive, even if they cannot be easily resolved. One possible resolution would be to assent to the reality of *karāma* in certain cases while denying its plausibility in others. For Toha, such a choice seems to be informed by his religious orientation and organizational membership. Thus, most of the *karāma* anecdotes that Toha shares on Facebook involve

*nahdliyin*. He has no difficulty in rejecting the reported *karāma* of those associated with other Islamic orientations like the Tablighi Jama'at or critiquing their misguided faith.

Toha's post received 757 likes, 144 comments, and is shared by 216 users. None of the comments is critical of Toha's stance, which shows that Facebook may generate echo chambers consisting of people with similar religious orientations. Indeed, many of those who comment are *karāma* enthusiastic *nahdliyin*. One response comes from a well-known *nahdliyin* activist who writes: "I agree. Even the Prophet, who was accompanied by angels, conformed to the laws of nature." What is interesting about this comment is the fact that it was written by someone who is in the habit of using Facebook to recount the ability of some saints (mostly *nahdliyin*) to suspend the laws of nature. Organizational belonging may thus become a way to negotiate the irresolvable tension between commitments to the laws of nature and the ontological possibility of *karāma*. One can deny the reality of *karāma* performed or narrated by certain actors and champion the laws of nature while assenting to its reality in others. While this may suggest that refusing *taṣdīq* may be driven by political motives, those who do so, like Toha, understand their refusal as being theologically driven. In fact, in Indonesia, political and theological discourses are often entwined and difficult to disentangle, as illustrated in the following section.

### The Political Theology of *karāma*

Producing, assenting to, or denying a *karāma* anecdote for a political reason can be observed in a widely shared anecdote involving a deceased Ḥaḍramī saint and the former governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known as Ahok. A Christian Indonesian of Chinese descent, Ahok is held in high esteem by some Indonesians but spurned by others due to his ethnic and religious background. In September 2016, he made a statement regarding his opponents' deployment of a Qur'ānic verse to argue that Muslims cannot vote for a non-Muslim in the gubernatorial election. For Ahok, utilizing the scripture for electoral purposes was an attempt "to fool" the public. This statement went viral on social media, sparking a

series of protests that culminated in one of the biggest demonstrations in Indonesia's history on December 2, 2016. Accused of blasphemy, Ahok lost the gubernatorial election and was sentenced to two years imprisonment in May 2017. (Peterson 2020)

Notwithstanding the controversies, some Muslims in Jakarta respect Ahok for his success in protecting a precarious Ḥaḍramī saintly shrine during his governorship. Situated in the vicinity of Jakarta's Tanjung Priok container terminal, the shrine is believed to intern the remains of Ḥabīb Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Ḥaddād (d. c. 1899), popularly known as Grandpa Priok (*Mbah Priok*). For years there was a conflict between the *Indonesian Port Company II* (PT Pelindo II) – a state-owned public company that has now become a subsidiary of the world's leading port management conglomerate CK Hutchinson Holdings – and the scions of the saint. The company had claimed ownership of the land on which the tomb is located and sought to demolish the mausoleum complex as part of the terminal's expansion plan. Following a long legal battle, the court ruled in favor of the company. On the morning of April 14, 2010, three thousand members of the Civil Service Police Units (Satpol PP) were dispatched by the Jakarta government to forcibly evict the saint's family and devotees who refused to budge from the complex. A riot broke out, leaving three police officers dead, hundreds of people injured, and eighty vehicles torched. In its aftermath, the governor of Jakarta brokered mediation between the conflicting parties, culminating in an agreement that the mausoleum will be protected and renovated at the government's expense (Quinn 2019). While the agreement was reached during the governorship of Fauzi Bowo that ended in 2012, it was during Ahok's term as governor that the renovation of the 5.4 hectares shrine complex was completed. On March 4, 2017, weeks before the second-round gubernatorial election, Ahok finally secured the shrine's precarious existence by declaring it a legally protected heritage site.

Between March 3 and 5, 2017, an Ahok supporter by the name of Rudi Valinka published a series of tweets on the relationship between Grandpa Priok and Ahok (@kurawa 2017). The tweets went viral and subsequently reappeared as a long article on several blogs before finding its way to

Facebook (Infomenia.net 2017). The article recounts the history of the contentious shrine up to the 2010 riot. It then tells how in January 2017, in the midst of the gubernatorial campaign, a scion of Grandpa Priok, Habib Sting, received a message from the deceased saint summoning Ahok to the shrine. Ahok paid a nocturnal visit to the shrine accompanied by Habib Sting. There, before the holy tomb, Habib Sting relayed the “supernatural whisper” (*bisikan ghoib*) of the saint to the “blasphemer.” Ahok, the message says, must prepare himself, for he is destined to become the leader of Indonesia.

Sya’roni was among the many who shared Valinka’s article. His repost drew 960 likes, 207 shares, and 274 comments. Responses range from those who assent to the veracity of the anecdote and those who accused the writer of producing a hoax for political purpose to those who problematize the ability of a deceased saint to communicate to the living. “Who actually whispered? How can a dead person whisper?” asks one comment. “This is an entertaining hoax,” says another. One person asks, “why would the deceased Grandpa Priok muddle himself in politics?” Yet another person writes that the anecdote “reads like a movie script.” Those who consent to the truth of the anecdote write against the naysayers by telling them to learn the religion deeper. “The saints are alive, they simply live on another plane, and they can still communicate,” one person writes. “Those who don’t believe this story are those who learn Islam from teachers who do not understand the reality of the saints,” writes another. Some even go as far as accusing the naysayers as either Wahhabīs or secularists. One comment says, “I simply believe in God. Why should I believe in tombs? That is idolatry. You should repent and restate the *shahāda*.” In response, a person affirms that “God has many ways of communicating with his creations... it is his prerogative to choose whoever he wishes to communicate with through any means he wants.” Another response to the comment says, “not believing in the *karāma* of the saints is a form of disbelief in the omnipotence of God... you should be the one to repent and restate the *shahāda*.”

It is clear from the comments above that this *karāma* anecdote engenders not just political but also theological debates among Muslims who do not

know one another. Liking and sharing the article can be construed as a form of *taṣḍīq* while choosing the angry emoji can be read as a refusal to assent. Interestingly, the comments suggest several grounds of refusal. Some deny the veracity of the anecdote for political reasons, while others deny altogether the ability of saints to communicate posthumously. The anecdote generates various forms of God-talk that reproduce contending theological positions. Accusations of associating divinity to any being other than God (*shirk*) or belittling God's omnipotence flies in the midst of the debate, turning the political debates theological. Indeed, those who question the story's veracity for political purpose are construed by others as *karāma* deniers, thereby reframing their politically-driven objection as theological position. Those who deny the plausibility of the *karāma* are accused of playing down God's omnipotence, while those who assent to it are charged with *shirk*.

Significantly, some are skeptical of the anecdote by pointing to its resemblance to a movie script. This is important to note. As a product of *takhyīl*, a *karāma* anecdote should ideally draw attention to the theological propositions it ought to concretize. Oftentimes, however, the anecdotes themselves can be too excessive to the extent that their consumers are stuck with their formal properties. Consequently, they may fail to generate God-talk and instead engender debates on their authenticity.

### Audiovisual anecdotes

Traditionally, *karāma* anecdotes are either orally communicated or textually inscribed. More recently, however, they have been reproduced in audiovisual formats, like films. In the 1980s, for example, several films were produced in Indonesia about the *wali songo*, the nine saints believed to Islamize Java (Izharuddin 2017). Such films are replete with *karāma* occurrences that are successfully restaged with the help of modern cinematic technologies. Such films can, of course, be seen as another iteration of the popular kung fu or martial art films. Insofar as they also serve explicit theological or moralizing purposes, however, they can be situated as a modern iteration of the old practice of theological *takhyīl*. Indeed films of the *wali songo* are



framed with explicit theological messages that help viewers to make sense of the films as more than mere entertainment.

While not everyone can produce a film, the development of computer-based filmmaking software has allowed amateur videographers to reproduce *karāma* anecdotes in audiovisual formats. Facebook, in turn, provides a platform for disseminating them. Nevertheless, most audiovisual *karāma* anecdotes that I have seen on Facebook are quite simple and unsophisticated. They simply consist of the voice of a narrator reading a previously prepared *karāma* narrative superimposed on images or photos of the saints and other illustrations. While the coexistence of voice and images help to shape viewers' imagination, they can also fail to reinforce one another, thereby weakening the imaginal product. Instead of eliciting *taṣdīq* or engendering God-talk, a weak imaginal product may draw attention to itself as opposed to the theological concepts it ought to concretize.

One example is a simple, amateurish, but nonetheless widely shared audiovisual *karāma* anecdote concerning the relatively obscure Abuya Syar'i of Ciomas, Banten. The five-minute video consists of two anecdotes framed by the narrator as "among the many *karāmas* of Abuya Syar'i witnessed by his disciples" (JEJAK PARA WALI 2020). The narrator spends the first minute of the video introducing Syar'i before moving to the first of the two anecdotes. This anecdote tells the story of a Malaysian who visited Syar'i to seek a particular gecko (*tokek*) that he needed for a medicinal purpose. Upon hearing the purpose of his visit, Syar'i excused himself and went to his bedroom. Moments later, Syar'i came back to the reception room empty-handed. The Malaysian guest was disappointed before seeing a giant reptile creeping behind Syar'i. Syar'i told his guest that the reptile is the gecko he is looking for. But the Malaysian was so scared by what he saw that he decided to leave. The second anecdote tells the story of two mountains located behind Syar'i's house. The narrator explains that the mountains used to be located elsewhere before Syar'i moved them – with God's help – to their current location. The reason being that Syar'i likes to teach his disciples about nature. He would often discuss the sun, the moon,

and the clouds while pointing at them. Having the mountains behind his home thus allows him to point to them as he teaches. The narrator then quotes Syar'i directly that "the purpose of creation is to serve as signs to help humans know God." The narrator concludes by asking the viewers to think deeply about the two *karāmas*, for they are testaments to God's omnipotence.

As the narrator tells the two anecdotes, the screen shows a series of images. There are photos of Syar'i sitting with his disciples, photos of two mountains, as well as a short video of a hungry-looking Komodo dragon to illustrate the giant gecko that sent shivers down the Malaysian guest's spine. Direct quotations from Syar'i read by the narrator are also shown on screen. Perhaps owing to its audiovisual format, this *karāma* anecdote enjoys significantly more attention than the textual variants. This post has been viewed by 1.9 million people, liked by 28 thousand people, and shared by four thousand. It was first posted on May 3, 2020, on a Facebook *TV programme* account Current News (*Berita Terkini*) that produces various audiovisual Islamic content, mostly sermons.

The post elicited 863 comments. Among the comments are those that question the anecdote's veracity. Such comments often entice others to respond, either affirming the skeptics or admonishing them for their denial of *karāma*. Observe the following:

Ali: Moving a mountain? Seriously? Sir, don't dream too much!

Soenarto: Ali, this is not a dream. If this is a dream, then the stories of the *wali songo* are false. You are stupid. This is *karāma* from God.

Ali: Soenarto, legends are for putting one to sleep. Don't be daff! It is impossible to move mountains. The person who created this post is a fool. Those who believe it must have a very low IQ, aka idiots!

Bambang: Ali does not believe in the wonders (*keajaiban*) of God. Surely, he is not a Muslim!

Peggy: Ali, for us, there is nothing impossible in this world so far as God wills it. If God wills it, a pious person can even make a whole island disappear in the blink of an eye.

Darsam: Ali, do you know that the Demak mosque was built overnight by the *wali songo*? But then again, for you, that is just a legend.

Hoegeng: May God grant his guidance to those who deny the *karāma* of God.

Yarman: Moving mountains? hmmm... This reminds me of a cigarette ad. Let's use our brains, brothers...

Ari: Yarman, everything can happen as long as God wills it. Those who deny *karāma* are infidels.

Rini: The story sounds like a *Mahabharata* film that I watched when I was a kid. Only the monkey God Hanuman can move a mountain [laughing emoticon].

Mansur: Sounds like a scene from a kung fu film. By the way, that is not a gecko. That is a Komodo dragon. What a hoax...

This audiovisual anecdote engenders lively God-talk among people – both men and women – who do not know one another. If *karāma* anecdotes are traditionally shared in homosocial settings among friends and acquaintances, their reproduction on Facebook has allowed for the emergence of heterosocial publics consisting of strangers, *nahdliyin* or otherwise, who are interpellated by the anecdotes. Facebook provides a digital platform in and through which strangers can respond to one another's position, eliciting theological debates that can easily turn ugly. Actors question each

other's faith or intellect. Refusal to assent to the veracity of the anecdote can easily be construed as signaling a lack of faith. Yet some, like Rini and Mansur, point out the resemblance between the anecdote and films of Indian mythology or Chinese martial arts. Mansur even calls on the discrepancy between the narration of the anecdote and the visual projected on the screen, which for him makes the overall veracity of the imaginal product suspect. Such a comment indicates how the visuals that are meant to reinforce the narration may indeed fail to deliver, thereby undermining the overall coherence of the imaginal product.

Interestingly, in this particular case, there are responses from people who claim to personally know Syar'i. These comments call into question the authority of the anonymous producer of the anecdote:

Bambang: Please do not invent things. I know Abuya Syar'i well, and he never likes superfluosness. I apologize for the audacity of this post.

Karim: The producer of this video is a liar. Abuya Syar'i is not like what the video portrays.

Muhammad: I know Abuya Syar'i. This video portrays him negatively. He is a good scholar, a pious man. He teaches what the Prophet taught. Nothing of this sort.

Jimi: Muhammad, perhaps you do not truly know him. You should reread the *karāma* of the saints.

Muhammad: Jimi, I believe in *karāma*. But to move mountains? I think that is no longer *karāma*, but a *mu'jiza* [miracles reserved for the prophets]. We should not equate the power of saints with that of the divine.

Jimi: Prophets have *mu'jiza*, but saints have *karāma*, all come from God. If God wills it, then it is possible, even if we deem it strange.

The foregoing conversations illustrate how *karāma* anecdotes take lives of their own beyond the people who are featured in them or those who know them. Three comments, written by those who claim to know Syar'i personally, deny the veracity of the anecdote. But as can be seen in Jimi's response, that does not really matter as what is at stake is the possibility of *karāma*. It seems that for Jimi, it does not really matter whether the particular anecdote is factual. What truly matters is the possibility of *karāma* precisely because it pertains to the theological notion of God's omnipotence.

While Facebook opens up new possibilities in the production and circulation of *karāma* anecdotes, it is also important to take into account its continuity with long-established patterns of *karāma* circulation. Traditionally, *karāma* anecdotes do service to marginal religious figures and sacred sites. Here we see a similar dynamic whereby Facebook allows the relatively obscure Syar'i to be known to a broader public. Equally important is how *karāma* anecdotes have always had an ambiguous relation to Islamic authority, and their circulation is often unregulated and free of the hierarchies that claim centrality to public religion. Similar to the circulation achieved through oral telling, Facebook enables wide circulation of *karāma* anecdotes without approval from any established authority or those associated with actors featured in the anecdotes. This suggests how the digital infrastructure opens up new possibilities for religious practice while simultaneously allowing for the continuity of established patterns.

## Conclusion

The squabble between Muhammad and Jimi is one of the many examples of digital God-talk engendered by the circulation of *karāma* anecdotes on Facebook. Such dissensions indicate that there is more to *karāma* anecdotes than the issue of facticity. It is in this sense that we can begin to understand how *takhyīl*, or creative imagination, operates as an affordance to *taṣdīq*. *Takhyīl* serves to provoke wonders and awe. In this sense, they are no different from myths, legends, Mahabharata films, or Kung Fu movies. When framed theologically, they become a means of perceiving God's omnipotence. Assenting to or denying the truth of the anecdotes can,

therefore, be construed as a theological practice. Insofar as the practice of *takhyīl* and *taṣḍīq* has now been made possible by, and occur in and through Facebook, then the social media platform has become a new infrastructure of theology.

*Karāma* anecdotes travel through contentious social mediascape. As they circulate, they attempt to create positions and recruit social actors to occupy them by inviting them “to construct practices of self-making in their terms” (Briggs 2007, 556). By liking, loving, sharing, or commenting on them – whether positively or negatively – Facebook users utilize the social media platform to position themselves in the anecdotes’ communicable cartographies, including as believers. As I have discussed in this article, the term *taṣḍīq* conveys a more complex meaning than what is denoted by the term *believing*. As described by Muslim theologians, the term does not only mean to regard what is knowable to be true but also means incorporating that which is held to be true into one’s own moral integrity as a person (Smith 1979, 105). *Taṣḍīq* involves recognition, affirmation, appropriation, and actualization. One assents to the reality of *karāma* by, among others, positive engagements with *karāma* anecdotes. This may entail yielding to such anecdotes and allowing oneself to be interpellated by them into one of the available discursive capacities that can aid their reproduction.

A social media platform like Facebook thus opens up the possibility for ordinary Muslims who do not know one another to digitally assent to and participate in theological questionings, inferences, recognition, and disputations. While Facebook may generate publics that consist of people coming from similar religious orientations (like the case of Toha and his fellow *nahdliyin*), the social media platform also engenders heterosocial arenas for debates between people representing different theological positions (see the case of Abuya Syar’i). Facebook certainly facilitates God-talk, heated or otherwise, involving men and women of various backgrounds that seldom takes place offline, at least in Indonesia. In this sense, it has come to function as a digital infrastructure of theology.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See three recent collections of essays: *Practicing Islam through social media in Indonesia*, edited by Martin Slama (2018); *Online publics in Muslim Southeast Asia*, edited by Martin Slama and Bart Barendregt (2018); *Piety, celebrity, sociality*, edited by Martin Slama and Carla Jones (2017).

<sup>2</sup> Here, I am rephrasing Webb Keane's definition of semiotic ideology as "basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world" (2003, 419).