

## 23 Peirce among the Muslim Saints' Graves in Java

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When radical religious purifiers, the Wahhabi, swept into Mecca and Medina in 1803, they made sure to destroy the graves of the saintly dead. Even that of the Prophet Mohammad himself wasn't spared (van Bruinessen 2009: 125). Nearly two centuries later, Yemeni insurgents, with the encouragement of fundamentalist preachers, used "shovels, pickaxes, assault weapons, rocket-propelled grenades, and explosives" against the grave complex of Aden's patron saint (Ho 2006: 5). These acts drew on a mix of political and religious motives. Both incidents, however, are moments within a broader history of religious iconoclasm aimed at statues, paintings, amulets, and texts, across several religious traditions. Attacking graves, however, seems excessive, as if the dead must be killed once again. As if destroying mere stones in itself could keep them in their place. Why this conflict over "mere" stones?

That the graves' critics have had to push back so hard – taking assault weapons to simple structures of wood, stone, and plaster – testifies to the recalcitrance of their targets. Graves attract people whose purposes and practices seem, to their critics, to be dangerous deviations from orthodoxy. The medieval scholar Ibn Taymiyya, one of the inspirations for modern Islamic fundamentalism, opposed the cult of saints' graves as tantamount "to originating a religion without divine sanction" (Memon 1976: 265). The grave threatens to produce *shirk*, the profound sin of setting up another divine entity in competition with the monotheistic God. But why should the faithful fear that mute stones will nudge visitors away from the true path? And why do equally pious visitors persist in the face of that risk?

This chapter looks at the veneration of saints' graves in Java, the heartland of Indonesia, the nation with the world's largest number of Muslims. It draws on my own preliminary observations as well as the research of other ethnographers and historians.<sup>1</sup> Although graves have not been physically assaulted in Java, their veneration is politically fraught and provokes aggressive criticism. Yet Indonesian grave visitation is booming. It is part of the global resurgence of Islamic piety, facilitated by a growing middle class, new social media, improved transportation, and the profitability of pilgrimage (Quinn 2008). None of these, however, is fully explanatory in and of itself. Nor are they necessarily relevant to what actually goes on around graves.

To grasp how one gets from these contexts to the plain stone slab surrounded by chanting pilgrims, how those pilgrims can, in turn, transform their contexts, and why these activities can become so contentious, this chapter draws on philosophical pragmatism. Pragmatism has been brought to bear on everything from social reform and educational policy to critical science studies and mathematical logic. For an anthropologist trying to gain insight into moral conflict, however, or ontological incommensurables – or, indeed, any practice at all – a useful starting point is the pragmatist axiom that “a *conception*...lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life” (Peirce 1966: 183).

To draw out the implications of the axiom, this chapter hones in on semiotics, the study of signs, which has arguably been the source of pragmatism’s most durable influence on the human sciences. This chapter tracks semiotic processes (“semiosis”) at several scales. After introducing pragmatism and semiotics, it moves from the grave as a material object, fixed in space and time, to the presence of the saint interred within it, and then to words and performances that surround them, the genealogies that link saint to Prophet, and finally, to the clashes of semiotic ideologies and political conflict to which they can give rise.

Pragmatism helps us see how the potential for conflict is inherent to semiosis. Asking why graves can be so attractive to some and so disturbing to others, it focuses not on doctrines but on the nexus of people, their verbal and physical practices, the powers they summon and evade, and the material things they engage. Starting from a minimalist ontology, pragmatism does not expect to find ultimate explanations in underlying mechanisms such as labor, cognition, or affect, functions such as domination, reproduction or power/knowledge, or overarching metanarratives like dialectical history, rhizomes, or racism, nor does it deliver up closed systems of cultural meaning or deep ontologies – although it has something to say about all of these. Simultaneously realist and anti-foundationalist, pragmatism invites us to start as the *fieldworker* does – which is as *anyone* does – *already in the midst of things*.

### **The popularity of saints’ graves**

In his magisterial account of the Yemeni diaspora across Asia, Engseng Ho (2006) shows how graves orient people’s movement, drawing them back from across vast distances and orienting them in deep histories (see also Coleman and Eade 2004, Eickelman and Piscatori 2013, Tagliacozzo 2013). Yet graves are not the only conceivable goals: why not mosques, caves, rivers, mountains, statues, libraries, fortresses, birthplaces, schools, monasteries, repositories of body parts, or, for that matter, living persons? The most important destination in Islam, after all, is not a grave but Mecca’s Kaaba and its black stone.

In Indonesia itself, despite sharp attacks on grave veneration since the early nineteenth century (Ricklefs 2012), visits to saints’ shrines in Java

have been exploding since the 1980s (Chambert-Loir 2002). One grave received 3.5 million pilgrims in 2005; in 2014 some 12.2 million people made the rounds of the *Wali Songo* (the Nine Saints) who are thought to have first brought Islam to Java in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Quinn 2004, 2019). New sites emerge when people start venerating graves of recently deceased religious or political leaders. Others are revealed in the dreams of present-day visionaries (Alatas 2020). Since the 1990s, a previously unknown saint, Mbah Priuk, has been identified with a grave in Jakarta's industrial harbor (Quinn 2019: 181–188). So devoted is his following that violent protests ensued in 2010 when police tried to clear the site to expand the port facilities. In the end, the saint's miraculous intervention prevailed. When I visited in 2017, custodians told me of phantom armies and displayed as proof a large photograph of the grave, transected by a streak of light (reproduced in Al-Haddad n.d). Sainthood powers may be invisible, but the pious typically encounter them in a material world.

### **Pragmatist phenomenology and semiotic mediation**

What *is* it about graves? The persistence and occasional ferocity of disputes about graves among Muslims themselves suggest that Islamic doctrine, mystical insight, popular discourses, and political factionalism, while obviously crucial to any understanding, will not provide a singular answer all by themselves. More controversially, I also assume in principle that our efforts to understand people cannot rest content with their own explicit self-portrayals alone. If the philosophical stance is by its very nature somewhat alien to ordinary subjectivity, that very distance can be one source of insight – as long as we do not consider that to be sufficient in itself and stop there either (Keane 2003a).

This chapter draws on the philosophical pragmatism initiated by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). Educated at Harvard a generation after the New England Transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, Peirce was a brilliant polymath. Best known for his creative approaches to signs, communication, and psychology, he also contributed to the physical sciences, and did foundational work in logic and set theory. A notoriously difficult individual, he never secured stable academic appointment after a brief stint at Johns Hopkins; his longest employer was the US Coast and Geodetic Survey. He died in poverty, leaving much of his writing in manuscript form. Nonetheless, Peirce had a profound impact on the thinking of his close friend, the philosopher and psychologist William James (Hollan this volume), one of his own few official students, John Dewey, and through them the sociologist George Herbert Mead, social reformer Jane Addams, and others. Despite his own rather abstract preoccupations, his greatest early impact was on public intellectuals and progressive activists, who took pragmatism to imply that the measure of philosophy is its actual effects on the world. Pragmatism subsequently influenced philosophers (Ludwig Wittgenstein [Palmié this

volume], Gilles Deleuze [McLean this volume], Nelson Goodman, Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam), sociologists (Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot, Hans Joas), phenomenologists (Alfred Schütz), linguists (Roman Jakobson), literary scholars (Umberto Eco), and political activists (Cornel West).<sup>2</sup> It is a major source for anthropological practice theory and sociological interactionism.

Pragmatism is the most important contemporary alternative in Western philosophy to the analytic and Continental traditions. Although taken in various directions after Peirce, pragmatism's core principle is expressed in the epigraph above, that we understand things through their consequences. To the extent that any given system, act, or event can have multiple consequences, so too there will be multiple understandings. Pragmatism anticipates the anti-foundationalism and anti-essentialism that define much twentieth-century thought, and opposes the Cartesian division between subject and object. It focuses on observable processes rather than seeking ultimate causes, disembodied rationalities, or transcendental truths. Peirce stressed the importance of chance and contingency – it is said he would have been unsurprised by quantum theory's introduction of uncertainty into physics. Peirce, however, was no skeptic. He had the realist commitments of the practicing scientist – for instance, in contrast to structuralism's arbitrary signs, his concepts of iconicity and indexicality (see below) connect signs to physical sensations and material causalities. But as a scientist,



*Figure 23.1* Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). Photo: New York Public Library/ Science Photo Library/Miriam And Ira D. Wallach Division of Art/Ritzau Scanpix.

Peirce recognized that our knowledge depends on how we interact with the world. These interactions take place within communities of inquiry, whose habits, practices, and purposes establish what will count as truth for them.

To reiterate, the analytical relevance of a conception, according to Peirce, “lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life” (Peirce 1966: 183). But there is, in principle, no reason to assume there is consensus within any given community about the conduct of life. Moreover, communities exist in history. Their truth, therefore, is always subject to contestation, revision, and refutation. Stressing the processual character of understanding, pragmatism insists that our grasp of things, while reaching toward reality, is necessarily provisional and perspectival – but not, for all that, mere fantasm or false consciousness.

Like any thinker, of course, Peirce has his limits and missteps, and this essay does not claim that he offers the solution to all problems. Part of pragmatism’s value for the anthropologist, however, is a certain metaphysical modesty. Demanding careful attention to the concrete forms that mediate human experiences and actions, it does not pretend to grant clairvoyant access directly into anyone’s thoughts, feelings, or subjectivity. Stressing the articulation of people, practices, and devices, it allows us to proceed without assuming that people, even within tight-knit communities and stern traditions, inhabit homogenous and self-consistent cultures or ontologies. One virtue of this approach is that it allows us to enter conflicted situations, such as Javanese grave veneration, without being forced to take sides by yielding up a single interpretation. Indeed, even those who venerate graves may be prone to ambivalent and shifting stances. As one observer remarks, pilgrims’ “seriousness collides with laughter, curiosity with bewilderment, piety with skepticism, hope with resignation, escapism with nuts-and-bolts practicality, stoicism with exuberance, individualism with the comfort of a crowd, intense spirituality with...the joy of shopping” (Quinn 2019: 19). Pragmatism expects this multiplicity as a matter of principle.

### **What is semiotics?**

Looking at concrete practices, devices, and their creative capacities, the pragmatist approach to semiotics asks what manner of carrying on in life they propose to those who engage in them – or who bear their brunt. What actions do they invite, facilitate, or constrain, and by implication, what struggles and contestations do they inspire? What, in short, is their “bearing upon the conduct of life”?

To forestall some common misunderstandings, semiotics is not primarily a hermeneutic technique. It does not aim to decode ciphers, interpret texts, or structure pairs of signifiers and signifieds.<sup>3</sup> Tracking how people make their way through the world and are grounded in the materiality of signs, it takes semiosis to be inherently processual and emergent. Peirce’s phenomenology, unlike Edmund Husserl’s (Throop and Stephan this volume),

rejects subjectivism or appeals to immediate perceptions (Chumley 2017). You have no direct encounter with things as they are, *even within your own sensorium*. Except, perhaps, in the incoherence induced by utter abjection (Daniel 1996), one's experience is mediated semiotically. You make sense of your experiences through conjectures or intuitions about signs, mostly without being aware of them. The process is not necessarily cognitive, although it took William James to emphasize the role of affect. Conjectures are necessarily fallible and creative. They take place in time, inseparable from actions, subject to contestation by others. Drawing on prior signs and giving rise to future ones, semiosis is infinite. There is no starting point: we are always *in media res*.

Semiosis has three components: the sign, the object it signifies, and the meaning or response it gives rise to. What you experience directly is the sign, something that is materially available to your senses or thoughts like a sound or visual image. You have no direct access to either the sign's object or its significance, which you can only infer. Since a "sign...is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (Peirce 1955: 99), semiosis is fundamentally contingent. The same sign can stand to someone else in some different capacity. It follows that there is no such thing as a sign *as such*, independent of those *for whom* it serves as a sign and of the particular "respect or capacity" *by virtue* of which it does so.

Semiosis takes place within communities. In fact, Peirce does not make a principled distinction between the individual and community, for "a person is not absolutely an individual. His thoughts are what he is 'saying to himself.'" Since semiosis develops both internally, as inner dialogue, and externally, one's "circle of society...is a sort of loosely compacted person" (Peirce 1966: 191). Unlike Dewey and Mead, however, Peirce gives no sustained attention to sociology, institutions, or power. But to the extent that any given semiotic process is necessarily shaped by people's projects, interests, allegiances, and social positions, we can argue that it is inevitably political (Gal and Irvine 2019). The disputes over graves can be seen in this light. Semiotics helps show why "mere" stones can matter so much.

The object of a sign – what it is a sign *of* – is never simply a static anchor for signification. The very concept of signification in semiotics is irreducibly dynamic. Signs give rise to new signs *ad infinitum*, since the meaning of any one sign becomes in turn the object of a new sign. Semiosis summons new contexts and new objects into existence, just as others change or disappear. As Zeus fades into myth, quarks emerge as realities.

It is inaccurate to say a certain sign signifies something. We should specify *who* takes something to be a sign, under what *circumstances*. This distinction is crucial for grasping the processual, creative, and conflictual character of semiosis. It follows that what even counts as a sign in the first place is not given in advance; imagination, dispute, and chance (Peirce 1966: 148) are unavoidable aspects of semiosis. Peirce's semiotics thus shares some features with anti-foundationalist theories such as Jacques Derrida's deconstruction



(Bubandt this volume). But Peirce understands that the potential for free play is generally constrained in two respects. First, semiotics does not confine signs within a self-contained system or self-referring textuality; they point outward. Second, semiosis takes place within actual communities. However lacking in foundations human understandings may be in theory, usually people work to assure one another that they inhabit knowable, more or less coherent, worlds (see Gershon 2019).

### **The materiality of the grave**

Most visitors to Javanese graves insist that they are simply adhering to an unchanging tradition dating back centuries (Rinkes 1996, Christomy 2008). How does something as dynamic as semiosis produce the conviction of enduring tradition and saintly presence? Pragmatism starts in the middle of the action, which includes what people have learned of that tradition. But if those teachings portray a transcendent otherworldly reality, for most people they become palpably real through their own actions in a materially present one (Keane 2008). The raw materials of semiosis are found in ordinary perceptions. As such, they are available for both the production of religious experience and its debunking by the iconoclast or skeptic.

Saints' graves in Java can be remarkably unprepossessing. If you are used to the sensory overload of Eastern Orthodox churches, Roman Catholic ossuaries, Theravada Buddhist shrines, Hindu temples, or Ottoman mosques, they can seem to offer little to the visitor. The saint's grave, like any other in Java, usually consists of a plain stone or wooden slab with a modest stone marker at the head and foot. For many, the shrine's very lack of representations evokes an unrepresentable transcendence. It may be distinguished from others by nothing more than a cloth or silk wrapping and scatterings of flower petals. This simplicity is consistent with the idea that death is the great equalizer, expressed in early Islamic norm that grave mounds should be low. This "egalitarianism was emphasized also below ground, for...all graves would end up uniformly lined up in neat rows in a line perpendicular to the *qibla* axis" (Halevi 2011: 188). One may thus take stone and slab as images of a community forged out of the austere uniformity of its components. Replicating this notional equality, and unlike mosques, the premises of Javanese saints' graves are open to men, women, and children, mixing freely. Indeed, this is something critics of veneration worry about (Beranek and Pupek 2009; Knysh 2017: 185).

The grave commonly marks the center of a community of graves, drawn together by their inhabitants' ties of kinship or discipleship, mapping the centripetal force of the saint. The grave itself is usually housed within a curtained chamber (*cungkup*), often with a locked door, under the care of a custodian. Some are so shrouded that ordinary visitors cannot see them, others are fenced off but visible. Yet the enclosed space, sheltered by a pavilion and surrounded by low walls also conveys an intimacy that Javanese compare to a sleeping place (Quinn 2019: 373). An elaborate complex with royal connections, such as that of Sunan Gunung Jati in Cirebon, hides this

saint's simple grave behind a series of barriers luxuriously decorated with imported porcelain. Only a select few may penetrate these barriers; the multitudes pray at the outermost gate. Beyond the outer gate of popular graves is often a bustling marketplace, where vendors offer religious paraphernalia, books, posters, scented oils, snacks, clothing, children's toys, musical instruments, souvenirs, and local produce.

To approach the grave is to progress by stages from a complex and relatively disordered external world toward a simple, highly ordered center – one at whose heart most visitors never arrive. The very materiality of the complex thus makes subjectively palpable what would otherwise be a merely conceptual tension between the egalitarianism of human lives as seen from a God's eye point of view and the hierarchy of divine (and political) authority as viewed from this world.

That palpability is not doctrinal – it is tacit and perceptual. People do not just mechanically absorb and reproduce the discourses around them. In general, what they say and hear about the graves has only a partial, often heavily revised, relationship to those experiences. For visitors who are cued to respond to the signs of divine presence, it often seems to emerge directly from their experiences. It is the task of semiotic analysis to give specificity and precision to the material processes that produce (or undermine) those experiences, their articulation with the teachings, rumors, memories, and debates that surround them, and the possible ways of living that can result.



*Figure 23.2* Visiting the tomb of Sunan Bonang, Tuban, East Java, 2019. Photo by the author.



### The grave's semiotic density

No one, of course, is there just for the material grave as such. They are visiting the saint who is interred there. What an Indonesian pilgrim to Hadramawt said can apply equally well to those in Java:

I love the saints and scholars. I want to be close to them...I want to be connected to them. That's why I learn from them, I pray for them, I recite their litanies, I read their texts, and I visit their graves.

(quoted in Alatas 2016: 625)

For this person, the material grave makes the immaterial saint sensibly present.

*But where is the saint?* In crude empirical terms, the visitor encounters nothing more than a stone, a curtain, a locked door, or a pavilion wall. Unlike early Christian saints' shrines (Brown 1981), there is not even a picture or sculpture. To be sure, the pilgrim has ideas that go beyond what can be seen, heard, smelled, touched, but scholars of religion have long admonished us not to ground religion in the inner realm of beliefs or assent to propositions (Asad 1993). So what in actual practice makes the empirically absent saint powerfully present for the visitor?

Like any sign, the grave is not identical to its object, the saint. The grave is connected to that object *only in certain ways*. For the sign has material qualities of its own (Peirce 1966: 53). Those are what you actually experience. Your intuitions and conjectures about the object of the sign derive from how you take those qualities to connect the sign and its object. There are three ways they may be connected, which Peirce dubs icon, index, and symbol. The icon is a sign that you take as resembling its object, like a map or photograph. The index is a sign that points to its object (like an index finger) because you take it to have a real connection to its object. That may be either because the object *causes* the sign, as smoke indexes fire, or because the object and its sign are *juxtaposed*, like the exit sign fastened to the door leading out. The symbol denotes by virtue of a *generality, rule, or convention for use*, such as the words and grammar of a language.

Although these three types of signs are analytically distinct, in any actual instance, they usually come in various combinations. As people draw conjectures from signs, different grounds produce different reality effects and afford different possible actions. An icon conveys information about its object: a drawing of angel Gabriel tells you he has wings but says nothing about whether he exists. Conversely, a sign taken to be indexical merely tells you that its object really exists, without telling you anything about its properties: until someone's dream reveals the identity of a new saint, an anonymous grave points to something, but just what remains unknown. The existence of symbols is virtual: no one actually experiences the grammar of their language, or the virtues of piety, as such. You only encounter particular instances of them.

Symbols remain opaque to someone who doesn't know the conventions of the system, just as an English speaker may find spoken Javanese to be mere sound, a Christian to consider Islamic virtue to be just superficial gestures.

Like most cultural artifacts, the saint's grave combines all of these sign types. The visitor may take it to be iconic of the body's length--which in turn can be iconic of the deceased person's qualities (in Demak, I was told the extra-long graves measure out their inhabitants' special sanctity). Graves enclosed by curtains may iconically invoke the presence of unseen powers by pointedly hiding them. At any moment, the visitor's actions may seek to be iconic of their respect for the saint whose presence they performatively invoke, and indexical of their own piety. Materialized in bodily demeanor and speech acts, pilgrims make their piety recognizable to the saint, to others, and to themselves – a miniature icon for the conduct of life in general. Indexicality grants a reality effect. The visitor may take the grave to prove the saint's presence: the grave is there *because* the saint is there, and therefore the saint is present for the visitor *because* there is a grave. We hear the reality-effect of this indexicality in the words of the man quoted above, who visits graves because "I want to be close to [saints]...I want to be connected to them."

Notice that I have hedged the preceding paragraph with conditionals. It does not say, for instance, that a sign *is* indexical, but rather that visitors *may* take it to be so. For nothing about signs is automatic. Since any entity can be treated as similar to (iconic) or connected to (indexical) any other in *some* way, just *how* a sign is taken is shaped by the projects and needs of people who take them to *be* signs of a certain sort (Gal and Irvine 2019: 100–101). It follows that one may deny or be unaware that the grave holds a saint. And it is in the very nature of semiosis that this can change. What you take a sign to be, or whether you even recognize that there *is* a sign in any instance, is not predetermined nor does it remain static. This basic openness is a precondition for the attacks on grave veneration. To the unreligious, the grave may be a historical relic, an aesthetic display, a fetish for the gullible, or a meaningless hunk of stone. To the religious reformer, it can be a dangerous hunk of stone, an instigation to idol worship. The possibilities do not stop there, for semiosis is potentially infinite. Moreover, people are not confined to one position or another, for they too are in motion, including the passages back and forth among faith, skepticism, scorn, and indifference. Much of the religious and political work surrounding graves consist of attempts either to prompt or prevent that motion.

### **An inducement to interaction**

How does a simple grave, which you might not even see behind its curtain, exert power? Javanese say they are visiting the saint. But most of them seek more than the presence of the saint. They go there in order to *do* things. At graves, words abound. The *cungkup* is often the still center of a dense and cacophonous crowd made up of different groups, each absorbed in their

own vocal production. They recite Qur'anic verses, prayers, and chants, sing, and ask for blessings (Zamhari 2010; Quinn 2019: 27–28). An orthodox position is that you visit the grave as a semiotically conventional symbol to prompt specific feelings or ideas: to bring yourself closer to God or to become mindful of death, and many are satisfied with these goals. But, as George Quinn remarks, a “culture of gifts and favours dominates at holy tombs.... Devotions are often called *ngalap berkah*, to pick up a favour, to grab a blessing” (2019: 375; see Wahdah Islamiya 2018). Taking advantage of the indexical logic of materiality that links saint to grave and grave to themselves, visitors often bring home flower petals from the grave, cloth they have rubbed on the grave or its enclosure, or bottles of water they have set next to it, as vehicles of blessing.

Many visitors seek more specific results. They ask the saint for help with every sort of personal problem, financial, romantic, professional, medical, for sports victories and election wins. For them, spoken words are gifts to the dead. So too are offerings of food, flower petals, incense, and cigarettes. In the familiar logic of votive offerings in other religions, visitors often consider their gifts to be part of a negotiation, and promise to reciprocate if their request is granted. At Mount Kawi in 1985, for instance, I encountered indexes of previous supplicants' success in shadow puppet plays they had sponsored for an invisible audience, and expensive wall clocks they had donated. The performativity is grounded in the icon diagramming one's relation to the unseen saint on the model of relations with mundane visible others. It takes advantage of the creativity of semiosis: to act toward a sign as if it presupposes a certain object is to summon that object into being, at least as a possible semiotic conjecture (Silverstein 1976; see also Hanks 1992, Lee 1997, Nakassis 2012). All of which, of course, is defeasible by the skeptic's or iconclast's debunking.

If the saint is present for the visitors, this is ultimately not by virtue only of the grave itself but also due to their own actions – although the faithful and the skeptic will differ over what forces direct those actions. To join the mass of people all facing the grave can have the effect of forming an indexical icon of the saint's power rather than simply reflecting the outcome of individual movements. Like iron filings around a magnet, the shape of the crowd diagrams the effects of the grave, – and thus the saint's – otherwise invisible pull. The culminating effect of so many individual actions, reinforced by and reinforcing one another, has the potential to bring into being an enlarged person making visible the effects of something unseen. Even more, despite the cacophony, each individual voice contributes to the formation of a small-scale icon of the community of Muslims.

It follows from the nature of the sign that even in the most traditionalist context, semiosis is never automatic or infallible. Icons say nothing about whether their object is real, indexes in themselves assert nothing about their object except that it exists. In order to function with specificity in any given instance, semiosis needs some guidance. Around saints' graves, it is the

work of ritual practices, inscriptions, pamphlets, pedagogical talk, rumors, social media chatter, and online polemics to shape and enforce (or to deny) how people take the grave to be a sign of the saint's presence.

This is the work of semiotic ideology (Keane 2018). Graves only function this way *for those who take them to be signs in a certain way*. Sometimes these assumptions remain part of the unspoken, taken-for-granted background; but they can emerge into the foreground, subject to reflection and challenge. This point is central to the social and political dynamics of semiosis. In Java, both religious reformers and secularists deny that graves function in the diverse and often contradictory ways that custodians, guides, and village gossips claim (Fox 2002). These contestations – struggles among contending semiotic ideologies – derive from the very nature of semiosis (Keane 2014).

Since the creative possibilities of semiosis are open-ended, visitors to graves are rarely left to their own devices. Authorizing discourses try to constrain them. Here language becomes crucial. Whereas many scholars focus on the literal content of people's words, pragmatism stresses verbal action. At graves, both come into play. Writing of Muslim graves in general, Martin van Bruinessen says

At some 'popular' shrines, the official religious authorities put up notices outlining what is proper and improper behaviour. . .visitors are enjoined to salute the deceased and to recite verses of the Qur'an for the benefit of his soul, but all forms of divination, vows and requests for intercession. . .are banned.

(2009: 146)

In Java, larger groups come with prayer leaders; others put themselves in the care of one of the grave custodians or purchase a booklet giving the hagiography of the saint and instructions for how to pray. These efforts do not just concern proper behavior – from which, at any rate, many people deviate. Visitors' behavior is consequential because it assumes that the grave is a sign of one sort or another, leading them to expect certain results from their visit. There are also public effects. Because the grave is a sign of the saint's presence for some but not others, that distinction of semiotic ideology makes the very act of visiting the grave a sign. By visiting the grave, one indexes oneself to be the *kind* of person who is addressed by that sign, an instance of a certain known type of pious Muslim – one who, among other things, is *not* party to the austere reformism that dominates much of Indonesia's public sphere. One becomes recognizable to others, and to oneself as well.

The saint is often a link in a genealogy that authorizes his (and, rarely, her – see Birchok 2016) sanctity by indexical ties to the Prophet. Prayers recited by guides and custodians include long lists of names. Genealogies are posted on walls and reproduced in pamphlets (e.g. Basyari 1989). Indonesian practice reflects the role of genealogy in the Arab world, where “there is widespread acceptance for the idea that authentic forms of human

community, ...are reproduced genealogically” (Shryock 1997: 6; see also Millie 2009, van Bruinessen 2009, Knysh 2017). The genealogy takes advantage of the affordances of biological reproduction to construct an icon of the transmission of immaterial qualities such that any given instance is indexical of its sources of authority and efficacy.

### **The habit of habit change**

Pragmatism encourages us to focus on the concrete means by which people ask and respond to fundamental ethical questions like those posed by Kant: *what should I do* and *what can I hope for*? It does so not by postulating a universal rationality or seeking a transcendental rule, nor by appeal to local systems of meaning or subjectivities tout court, but by looking to actual practices in time. To say that belief involves “the establishment in our nature of...a *habit*” (Peirce 1966: 121) takes us away from the dubious effort to ground religion in inner states and individual subjectivities (Asad 1993). This perspective converges with that of the pilgrims and critics who focus so much on pious habits. The habit of piety is a projection into the future of acts taken to be icons of past acts, themselves icons of the Prophet’s way of life, the *sunna*, and indexes of its effects. In this light, tradition itself is habit, iconicity sustained within a community, whose ultimate object is something (as Peirce defined ‘reality’) “independent of the vagaries of me and you” (Peirce 1966: 69). It depends on people taking their conduct of life, and that of those around them, to be iconic of previous signs, and future ones in turn.

For those hoping to become more pious, visiting graves partakes of the distinctively human “habit of taking and laying aside habits” (Peirce 1935, para. 101). This might mean behaving differently, but it might also mean seeing signs in a different light. Much of the practical work of habit formation aims at shaping one’s behavior to resemble the *sunna*. Given the nature of semiosis, however, the results are *inherently* disputable. For to take something as iconic is to find a similarity between things by ignoring how they differ (Deacon 1997: 76) – a map is never as large as the territory, nor a person as two-dimensional as their best smartphone selfie. This is why Javanese Muslims can argue over which qualities of demeanor, dress, offerings, liturgies, choice of languages, or gestures make them iconic of piety (Brenner 1996). Virtually all the women I saw at graves in 2019 wore headscarves, but they did not necessarily bring offerings; their grandmothers might have done the opposite. There is a specific political history behind the change (Hefner 2000, Ricklefs 2012), but politics cannot in itself explain why *these* matters that seem so superficial to some become so fiercely contested by others. These differences respond to the openness of semiosis itself, for signs do not interpret themselves – an unsecured condition that for some may inspire hope, for others, anxiety

Why do reformers so revile pilgrimage in Indonesia and, elsewhere even attack the graves? No single answer will suffice, but here’s what pragmatism might help us see. Although critics try to control semiosis through preaching, pedagogy, notices, guidebooks, and regulations, the most direct way to try to

alter habits is to suppress or even destroy the material signs themselves. This is because *it is the sign – not its object or its meaning – that we actually perceive*. Therefore, different people can always take a given sign to indicate *other* objects and give rise to *other* meanings: in principle, *the possibility of dispute cannot be eliminated*. As long as semiotic materials like graves are available, new conjectures, unforeseen habits or beliefs may arise, and with them the risk of heterodoxy, blasphemy, and other evils. To eliminate those materials can be an effort to eliminate the risks of semiotic mediation.

It is not for the anthropologist to take sides between those who venerate graves and their opponents, nor to sort out more or less “authentic” practices and practitioners. What we can do is start from what the protagonists share with one another, and, to an extent, with the anthropologist. Some of that is conceptual – there is no disagreement among Muslims about the reality of Allah and His Prophet. But for concepts to have a bearing on the conduct of life, they must be realized in some phenomenal form. One of the things pilgrims and their critics *share* is the physical presence of the graves – this is what brings their differences into focus.

Anthropology is a way of paying attention in the world. Anthropologists' engagement with philosophy should not be theory-building for its own sake. Rather, it should prompt us to notice what we might otherwise have missed. It should help us make connections we might otherwise not have made. By helping us develop portable concepts that cross our various ethnographic contexts, it can also open up new ways for anthropologists to learn from one another. What can anthropology do for philosophy? Although that is not for me to say, I hope the answer will include a serious interest in the gritty contingencies of social being.

How, then, can the approach sketched here shed light on the religious experiences, the ethical strivings, and the political struggles that saints' graves inspire? Pragmatism resists the metaphysical quest for what “really” lies hidden beyond visible actions and manifest consequences. Yet it should also resist ontological counter-claims *against* those whom it studies – it can only acknowledge, openly, if paradoxically, its own situated character. It is in no position to refute those who *do* seek metaphysical truths. Therein lies its modesty. To repeat, the anthropologist – *like anyone at all* – starts in the midst of things. What the philosopher Otto Neurath said of science applies to understanding more generally: we are building a boat while sailing it, without being able to pull it to shore to start from scratch. We sailors have no option but to continue constructing the very craft on which we float – far from any port, to be sure, but nonetheless really afloat on a real sea.

## Notes

- 1 My observations of grave visitations date back to 1985, when my fieldwork focus was elsewhere. In 2017 and 2019, in an exploratory mode, I visited 20 pilgrimage sites with Julian Millie (in West Java and Sumatra) and Ismail Alatas (in Jakarta and Central Java), for whose insights I am deeply indebted.



- 2 See Bernstein (2010), Boncompagni (2016), Deleuze (1983), Frère and Jaster (2019), Misak (2016), Vellodi (2014), and West (1989). My discussion is confined to humans, but Peirce took semiotics to extend to all living entities; see Kohn (2013) and Kockelman (2010).
- 3 Although Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist linguistics is often called "semi-ology" and Clifford Geertz sometimes referred to his interpretive anthropology as "semiotic," neither resembles Peircean semiotics.

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