

## Supplicating, naming, offering: *Tawassul* in West Java

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*The tawassul is a ritual invocation popularly used in West Java at grave visits and in other Islamic observances. In simple terms, it consists of two acts; the naming of figures who are considered as mediators (wasilah) between a supplicant and Allah, and the making of an offering for the benefit of the mediator. Participants in tawassul hold contrasting understandings of what is achieved by performing it. Furthermore, the invocation is easily adapted for diverse settings while retaining its basic syntax. This multivocality and flexibility provide keys to understanding the popularity of the tawassul as a religious observance for Sundanese Muslims.*

The *salat* is the obligatory worship ritual for Muslims, and hence occupies central space in descriptions of Islamic worship. Yet it is by no means the only ritual performed by Muslims. There are also non-obligatory observances that fulfil important ritual, social and cultural functions, and which furthermore respond to the texture of social conditions in specific locations. This paper is a discussion of one such observance, known in West Java as *tawassul*. I participated in this ritual on numerous occasions during one year's fieldwork in West Java from 2002 to 2003.

Succinctly put, the *tawassul* is a ritual in which offerings are made for the benefit of various Muslims who are considered to occupy a position of favour with or close proximity to Allah. Performance of the *tawassul* consists of verbalising the names of these Muslims, followed by the recitation of the first chapter of the Qur'an, *al-fatihah*.<sup>1</sup> This recitation is performed as an offering for the benefit of the parties named. In essence, the *tawassul* is a ritual performance of naming followed by offering.

The *tawassul* is performed as a constituent part of many religious observances. My fieldwork was concerned with *manakiban*, the ritual reading of the signs of Allah's favour (*karamat*) upon Abdul Qadir al-Jaelani, one of Islam's most popular intercessors.<sup>2</sup> The

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1 Indonesian and Sundanese spellings are used for Arabic words commonly used in these languages. This paper does, however, discuss Arabic texts that Indonesians conventionally write and utter in Arabic. When excerpting from these texts, principles of transliteration from Arabic are implemented.

2 Julian Millie and Syihabuddin, 'Addendum to Drewes: The Burda of al-Būṣīrī and the miracles of Abdul Qadir al-Jaelani in West Java', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 161, 1 (2005): 114–24.

*tawassul* was, without exception, performed in that ritual. It is also an integral part of other ritual practices, most notably *jarah* (supplicating at graves) and in some cases, *pengajian* (study groups). When *tawassul* is performed in these events, it involves group participation. Yet many individuals practise *tawassul* in the privacy of their own homes. For these reasons, I came to see the *tawassul* as the most authoritative supplicatory prayer for private and communal performance in West Java.

This paper will be of value, it is hoped, purely for its exploration of such a popular observance. Yet my intention here is also to make the *tawassul* part of a discussion at a more general level, a discussion arising from a problem grappled with by all researchers into Islamic practice and tradition in Indonesia; difference and how to approach it. The problem is how to capture the complexity of conflicting versions of Islamic participation and knowledge, versions often evident simultaneously within small-scale communities.<sup>3</sup>

Islamic practice in Java and elsewhere manifests varying combinations of symbols and conventions reflecting local and global understandings of Islamic authority. This variety has brought forth a number of responses from researchers, with one conception in particular recurring among them. This conception approaches difference as a marker of religious outlooks occupying varying positions between two poles. One pole is characterised by a preoccupation with ritual practice premised on local understandings of ritual efficacy. The other is characterised by a need to display affiliation with that formalised system of beliefs and obligations known as Islam. In the former, signs of Islamic convention may be partial or lacking, for outward conformity with its scheme of beliefs and doctrines is not of pressing concern. What is important is achieving ritual efficacy. By contrast, Muslims at the latter pole ensure that ritual practice can be understood in the greater scheme of formalised Islam. These poles are described with varying nomenclatures. The best known is Clifford Geertz's dichotomy between *abangan* and *santri*. He notes that '*abangans* are fairly indifferent to doctrine but fascinated with ritual detail, while among the *santris*, the concern with doctrine almost entirely overshadows the already attenuated ritualistic aspects of Islam'.<sup>4</sup> Robert Hefner employs the terms 'custom' and 'religion'.<sup>5</sup> A key point in the process of Islamisation of lowland Java was the moment at which a consciousness of the polarity began to inform ritual practice.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper, I use this framework to investigate the success of the *tawassul*. I argue that the *tawassul* has become a dominant form of supplication for two reasons. First, it accommodates variety by its capacity to be adapted to the requirements of the specific situations in which Muslims make supplications. While retaining the same basic syntax, it can be changed to fit the needs of diverse situations. These needs may be linked to the place at which the *tawassul* is performed, and also to the varying

3 Andrew Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese religion: An anthropological account* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 1–6.

4 Clifford Geertz, *The religion of Java* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 127.

5 Robert W. Hefner, *Hindu Javanese: Tengger tradition and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 109.

6 Hefner, *Hindu Javanese*, p. 109; Lynda Newland, 'Syncretism and the politics of the *Tingkeban* in West Java', *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 12, 3 (2001): 314–15.

understandings of Islamic authority prevalent in diverse contexts. The second reason for the enduring and widespread popularity of the *tawassul* is its multivocality. It is interpreted in differing ways by those participating in it, and for this reason, can be accepted as authoritative Islamic practice by congregations with members at varying positions between the two poles described above. With limited exceptions, it allows simultaneous supplication by Muslims intent on locally oriented conceptions of ritual correctness and also by Muslims seeking affirmation of canonical tenets of Islamic belief.

My first concern is to answer the question: What is *tawassul*? This question is dealt with in the first of the article's four sections. Because the popularity of the *tawassul* in Indonesian Islamic tradition is founded on the subjectivities people bring to it, the second section (Understandings of *tawassul*) presents an account of six understandings people bring to the event. The diversity evident in these interpretations illustrates the multivocality enabled by the *tawassul*. It illustrates how Muslims holding varying understandings of propriety in ritual and worship can participate in it side by side. The two remaining sections contain two approaches to the *tawassul* that ground my argument in situated practice. The first (*Tawassul* and Inclusivity) discusses the tendency to inclusiveness evident in the *tawassul*. It enables offerings to groupings of Islamic figures that have fluctuating memberships, while still retaining an unchanging syntax. This inclusiveness has seen invocations made to groupings of intercessors transcending the borders constructed between religious denominations. The fourth section approaches what I call the '*tawassul* archive'. Many *tawassul* have been fixated in writing, bequeathing to us an archive allowing observation of Islamic diversity in Indonesia.

### What is *tawassul*?

#### *Definition*

The meanings of the word *tawassul* are given a useful summary by Muhammad Nasir ud-Din Al-Albani.<sup>7</sup> His definition approaches the word through two frames, the first being its use in the Arabic language generally, and the second the context in which it appears in the Qur'an.

He illustrates the general meaning by reference to the cognate term *wasilah* (Arabic: *wasilah*). The *wasilah* is a means by which a person, goal or objective is approached, attained or achieved. The *tawassul* or *tawassulan* is the use of a *wasilah* for this purpose. It follows from this general meaning that in religious contexts the *tawassul* is the use of a *wasilah* to arrive at or obtain favour with Allah. Another meaning of *wasilah* is high rank or status with a king, or a favourable situation in a courtly environment.<sup>8</sup> As we shall note below, this latter meaning was often invoked in explanations of *tawassul* I encountered in Indonesia.

Al-Albani approaches the term's Qur'anic meaning through the most frequently cited of those verses in which the word *wasilah* appears:

<sup>7</sup> Muhammad Nasir ud-Din Al-Albani, *Al-Tawassul: Anwâ'u-hu wa Ahkâmuhu* (Dimashq: Muḥammad 'Id ul-'Abbâsî, 1977), pp. 8–14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

O ye who believe! Be mindful of your duty to Allah, and seek the way of approach [*wasīlah*] unto Him, and strive in His way in order that ye may succeed. (Al-Mā'idah 35)<sup>9</sup>

The meaning of the term '*wasīlah*' in this verse, according to Al-Albani is 'a thing that is used to obtain closeness and favour with Allah'.<sup>10</sup> As I shall discuss below, Al-Albani understands the concept narrowly. According to him, the *wasīlah* intended in this verse can only mean pious acts that are pleasing to Allah (*al-a'mâl as-ṣâlihât*). This understanding of *wasīlah* is far narrower than the interpretations I encountered in West Java.

#### *Tawassul in practice*<sup>11</sup>

I participated in *tawassul* held in a number of environments, including private homes, where it was performed as part of *manakiban* (the reading of Abdul Qadir's *karamat*, *karamat* being the miraculous signs of his saintliness) or *pengajian* (study groups), and in the *pesantren*, where *tawassul* was performed as an opening to many ritual and worship activities.<sup>11</sup> A third setting was grave-sites, where *tawassul* was used to make supplications to Allah using the occupant of the grave and other intermediaries as *wasīlah*.

It is always performed while sitting on the floor. The *tawassul* is uttered in Arabic, and is sometimes read from a written text, although it is more common to find it being performed from memory. The leader commences by reciting the following, or something very similar to it:<sup>12</sup>

To the presence [*ilâ hadrah*] of the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him and upon his kin, companions, wives, descendants and the people of his distinguished household, may something of Allah's be with them [*shai'un li'llâhi lahum*]: (*al-fatihah*)

After this, the gathering recites the first chapter of the Qur'an (*al-fatihah*) in unison. At the conclusion of this, the leader recites the following or something similar:

9 The translation is that of Marmaduke Pickthall, *The meaning of the glorious Qur'an: An explanatory translation by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2001), p. 154.

10 Al-Albani, *Al-Tawassul*, p. 10.

11 This article's discussion of *tawassul* is largely applicable to the *tahlil*. The term *tahlil* (Arabic: *tahlil*) means the utterance of the formula *Lâ ilâha illâ'llâh* (There is no God other than Allah). In Indonesia and in many parts of the Muslim world, the word *tahlil* has come to signify a supplication performed for the benefit of a recently deceased person. See Constance E. Padwick, *Muslim devotions: A study of prayer-manuals in common use* (London: SPCK, 1961), pp. 132–3. The text of the *tahlil* is widely available in prayer manuals. A typical one is Achmad Sunarto, *Surat Yaasiin & Tahlil, Huruf Arab-Latin Terjemahan Bahasa Indonesia* (Jakarta: Bintang Terang), pp. 51–84. *Tahlil* consists of three parts. The first is the making of offerings to named Muslims, with recitation of *al-fatihah* constituting the *hadiah* (gift). The second is the recitation of a compilation of Qur'anic *ayat* (verses), in which the phrase *Lâ ilâha illâ'llâh* is heard on a number of occasions. The third is a prayer seeking the granting of benefit in return for the reading of the *tahlil*. The first of these parts, the offering component, shares the same wording as the offering component of the *tawassul* (see below), and the compilation of *ayat* is also very similar in both rituals. For these reasons, although the *tawassul* and *tahlil* are distinguished by the different contexts with which they are associated, the *tahlil* may be seen as a *tawassul* with specific focus on utterance of *Lâ ilâha illâ'llâh*.

12 The original of the text presented in translation here is found in *Alaa Inna Auliyaa Allohi Laa Khaofun Alaihim Wa Lahum Yahzanun; Tanbih, Tawassul, Manaqib, Basa Sunda* (Tasikmalaya: Yayasan Serba Bakti Pondok Pesantren Suryalaya, 1956), pp. 10–13.

Next, to the spirits [*thumma ilâ arwâh*] of his forefathers and brethren from the prophets and messengers, and to the angels near [to Allah's throne], to the martyrs and the pious ones and to the kin of all of these and the companions of all of these, and to the spirit [*rûh*] of our father Adam and our mother Hawa' and their offspring up to the day of judgement, may something of Allah's be with them [*shai'un li'llâhi lahum*]: (*al-fâtihah*)

After this, the gathering recites once again the first chapter of the Qur'an in unison. At the conclusion of *al-fatihah*, the leader recites the following or something similar:

Next, to the spirits [*thumma ilâ arwâh*] of our lords and masters and imams Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman and Ali and to the rest of the companions and kin, and to the successors and the successors of the successors. May goodness be with them up to the day of judgement, and may something of Allah's be with them [*shai'un li'llâhi lahum*]: *al-fâtihah*

These three paragraphs enable participants to understand the *tawassul* as an affirmation of belief in a religious framework revered by Muslims the world over. Not all of its references, however, are to lofty and distant figures. The final paragraph of the *tawassul* usually invokes a 'catch-all' grouping, whose broad membership invokes the immediate family of those participating:

Next, to the spirits [*thumma ilâ arwâh*] of our fathers and mothers and of our spouses and our children and our fellow men and of our grandfathers and of our grandmothers and of our sheikhs and of all believers male and female and of muslims male and female living and dead, may something of Allah's be with them [*shai'un li'llâhi lahum*]: (*al-fâtihah*)

This pattern of naming and recitation is repeated for a number of times that is not fixed. Sometimes, the groupings are united into one lengthy invocation, requiring the recitation of only one *al-fatihah* at its conclusion. In all *tawassul*, the syntax of each invocation (*thumma ilâ arwâh* ... *shai'un li'llâhi lahum*) does not alter. What do change are the identities of the *wasilah*, that is, the individuals who are thought to have favoured status with Allah.

The recitation of *al-fatihah* produces an exchange of accrued benefit. Through their recitation of *al-fatihah*, the group hopes to receive a benefit from Allah (*pahala*). In the *tawassul*, this *pahala* is gifted to the person named in the invocation, and the grantee will therefore be well disposed towards the supplicant. This offering component is often named *ngahadiahkeun pahala bacaan* (gifting the benefit of recitation).<sup>13</sup>

At the conclusion of this series of namings and offerings, the gathering recites or sings a compilation of chapters and verses from the Qur'an.<sup>14</sup> Those in attendance, young and old, are generally able to recite this without reference to written texts. The

13 Edy Ridwan, *Penjelasan Masalah Tawassul, Hadiah Pahala, Jamuan Kematian, Tahlil / Dzikir* (Pekalongan: Batavia, 1995), pp. 36–54. In fact, the entire *tawassul* is sometimes referred to as *ngahadiahkeun pahala bacaan*. The many names people give to the ritual indicate varying perceptions of what is happening. It was not uncommon to hear people refer to the *tawassul* as *ngabaktian* (to perform service for someone), *silsilah* (the genealogical chain through which *tarekat* lineages are traced) or *sajarah* (legitimising historical remembrance).

14 The contents of the compilation vary. The following is typical, although perhaps lengthier than most: *Al-Iklâs* x 3, *Al-Falaq* x 1, *Al-Nâs* x 1, *Al-Fâtihah* x 1, *Al-Baqarah* (1–5) x 1, *Ayat al-Kursi* x 1, *Al-Qadr* x 1, *Al-Asr* x 1, *Al-Nasr* x 1, *Salawat Tafriyyah/Munfarijah* x 3, *Al-Fâtihah* x 1.

compilation, which is conventional, is a selection made according to various *hadith* (traditions of the Prophet's sayings and deeds) about the efficacy of the various *ayat*. It is uttered in order to facilitate the transmission and acceptance of the offering of gifts.

### Understandings of *tawassul*

This definition of *tawassul* and description of its performance do not adequately convey the significance of *tawassul* for the Sundanese. During my research in West Java, I was continually meeting with differing understandings of *tawassul* held by those who practised it. This multivocality is important for appreciation of the popularity of the rite and its importance to Indonesian Islam.

In the following paragraphs, I relate six diverse understandings of *tawassul*. Some are obtained from personal interactions or observations, others from written sources. For the purpose of conveying the wider dynamics in which *tawassul* is received, I have included also an understanding from a Muslim scholar of international stature, for whom the *tawassul* is problematic when considered against the normative sources of Islam.

#### *First understanding: Tarekat and sheikh*

The sufi orders (*tarekat*) draw wide participation from Sundanese. The largest in terms of followers is the *Tarekat Qadiriyyah wa Naqsyabandiyyah*, which maintains remembrance of Abdul Qadir al-Jaelani (died 1166 CE) as teacher, saint and role model. This man has been revered as a *wasilah* for a number of centuries in various parts of Indonesia.<sup>15</sup> In West Java, a very popular method of invoking him as a *wasilah* has been the ritual reading, recitation or singing of the stories of his *karamat*.<sup>16</sup> *Tawassul* is an essential part of this observance, known as *manakiban*. In the past, the most popular text used for this purpose has been the *Khulâṣat ul-Mafâkhir* [Synopsis of the Noble Deeds], originally composed in Arabic by the Yemeni scholar Al-Yafi'i (1298–1367 CE).<sup>17</sup> Eighteenth-century Banten was the locus for the translation of this text into Javanese, and its use as a tool for seeking intercession spread from there into the surrounding communities.

15 Martin van Bruinessen, 'Shaykh 'Abd al Qâdir al-Jilânî and the Qâdiriyya in Indonesia', in *The Qâdiriyyah Order*, ed. Thierry Zarcone, Ekrem Isin and Arthur Buehler (Istanbul: Simurg, 2000), *Journal of the History of Sufism*, special issue, vol. 1–2. According to Reid, the *tahlil* 'may have been spread through Indonesia by the earliest adherents of Kadiriyya mysticism', see Anthony Reid, *Charting the shape of early modern Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), p. 21. This seems very possible in the case of West Java. Abdul Qadir is more often than not invoked in *tawassul* I witnessed in West Java, even where the context had no affiliation with the saint or his *tarekat*. This omnipresence suggests the development of *tawassul* in West Java was coeval with the spread of Abdul Qadir's fame as intercessor. Furthermore, many *tawassul* used in West Java contain lists of notable sheikhs associated with the *tarekat* movement in the centuries prior to Abdul Qadir's birth. In *tarekat* remembrance, these sheikhs are Abdul Qadir's predecessors, through whom he is linked to the prophet Muhammad. See J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi orders in Islam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 12–14, 261–3.

16 Millie and Syihabuddin, 'Addendum to Drewes', pp. 114–23.

17 P. Voorhoeve, 'Het origineel van de Hikajat Abdulkadir Djelani', *Tijdschrift voor Indische taal-, land- en volkenkunde*, 83 (1949): 110–24.



The *Khulâsat ul-Mafâkhir* illustrates the *karamat* of Abdul Qadir in successive anecdotes relating extraordinary occurrences in which Abdul Qadir's favoured status with Allah is made manifest. In one of these anecdotes, a merchant who has lost his camels finds them after invoking Abdul Qadir's name. The anecdote closes with a statement from Abdul Qadir, 'If anyone seeks my help [*astaghâtha bi*] when in distress, I will bring light to them. If anyone calls me by name, I will give them solace. If anyone uses me as *wasîlah* to Almighty Allah [*tawassala bi*] when in a state of need, I will grant their request.'<sup>18</sup>

This understanding of *tawassul* resonates with a core precept of *tarekat* sufism; deceased saints and sheikhs are present for their followers in a non-corporeal form, and can respond to the supplications of their followers by interceding from the special position they have with Allah.<sup>19</sup> This conception gives a specific meaning to the use of the words *rûh* and *hadrah* in the *tawassul* (see above). The gift is addressed to a continuing presence (*hadrah*), namely the spirit (*rûh*) of the deceased sheikh.

#### *Second understanding: Tawassul in the selamatan*

The ritual reading of Abdul Qadir's *karamat* is not only performed by followers of the *tarekat*, but also by villagers who have no affiliation with it. These people stage the ritual reading, of which the *tawassul* is a compulsory part, within the framework of the ritual meal (*selamatan*). The reading and accompanying meal are offered for the granting of specific intentions (Sundanese: *maksad*). In this social environment, the ritual reading occurs alongside a system of ritual practices concerning pregnancy, birth, circumcision, marriage and death, and the preparations for the evening include preparation of symbolic objects, incense, plants and foods.

The *selamatan* provides a framework for the understanding of *tawassul* performed within it. Underpinning the *selamatan* is the conviction that the specially prepared ritual setting enables offerings to the spirits of ancestors (*karuhun*). These are considered by some Sundanese to be present at the *selamatan*. The same conviction underlines the performance of the *tawassul*. I once attended a *selamatan* held in Bandung in the home of Ibu Isa and Jang Aca. A ritual specialist was engaged to make an opening speech and recite the *tawassul*. In his address, just prior to commencing the *tawassul*, he said:

I will continue by performing the *tawassul*, so that we can show tribute, in parallel fashion [*paralel ngabaktian*] to the saints, martyrs [*suhada*], and to all our brothers and sisters who have left this world. We must pray that they are *selamat* [free from difficulty] for the sake of the intentions of [our hosts] Jang Aca and Ibu Isa...

The *tawassul* is understood here as a way of 'paying tribute to' notable Muslims and the ancestors (*karuhun*) of those participating. These ancestors are considered to

18 Bat. Gen. 93 [*Khulâsat ul-Mafâkhir*], hikayat 54.

19 Abdul Qadir al-Qadiri Ibn Muhyi id-Din Al-Arbili *Kitâb manâqib tâj il-auliyâ' wa burhân il-asfiyâ' al-qutb ir-rabbâni wal-ghauth is-samadâni as-sayyid 'Abd ul-Qâdir al-Kailâni (wa huwa al-kitâb ul-mussaman bi-tafrih ul-khâtir tarjamat ush-shaiikh 'Abd ul-Qâdir al-Qâdiri ibn Muhyi ad-Din al-Arbili)* (Semarang: Maktabah Ma'bu'a Tuha Putra), pp. 3–6.

be instrumental in the granting of the intentions (*maksad*) that motivated the host to hold the *selamatan*. In recognition of this potency, the *tawassul* is used as a way of showing respect to them. The final paragraph of the *tawassul*, excerpted earlier, explicitly lends itself to this interpretation. The interpretations of the words *hadrah* and *rūh* implied here are similar to those mentioned in the previous understanding. *Hadrah* refers to the continuing presence of deceased ancestors and famous Muslims. *Rūh* and its plural *arwâh* are understood to refer to the spirits of deceased ancestors.

*Third understanding: Salafi prescription*

The approach of Muhammad Nasir ud-Din Al-Albani (born in Albania 1914, died in Jordan 1999) to the *tawassul* reflects his strict *salafi* methodology; the only permissible *tawassul* is that which is *mashrūʿ*, which means legally supported by the Qurʾan and/or prophetic traditions. Al-Albani's review of the relevant *ayat* and *hadith* leads him to the conclusion that there are three permissible forms of *tawassul*.<sup>20</sup> The first is *tawassul* by invoking the names of Allah or his *sifāt* (attributes). The second is *tawassul* in the form of performance of a pious deed ('*amal ṣālih*). Third, a Muslim may perform *tawassul* by asking a living, pious man to make a prayer on his behalf. Al-Albani goes to great length to discredit the understanding of *tawassul* as an invocation to a deceased person believed to have a privileged position with Allah. For Al-Albani, this is superstition. In his interpretation, it treats creations of Allah as deities, and is not approved in any reliable *hadith*.<sup>21</sup>

A form of *tawassul* reserved for specific comment by Al-Albani is that in which the penitent believes that the spirit (*rūh*) of a deceased sheikh, such as Abdul Qadir al-Jaelani, is listening to the *tawassul* and will intercede on the penitent's behalf. He quotes with approval Sheikh Abu at-Taib Shams ul-Haqq's description of this as 'a repulsive act of *shirk* [polytheism] and uncontaminated foolishness'.<sup>22</sup>

*Fourth understanding: Nahdhlatul Ulama prescription*

Our fourth understanding creates a symmetry with the one just mentioned. Hasyim Asy'ari (1871–1947) was a founding figure of *Nahdhlatul Ulama* and a spokesperson for a generation of traditionally oriented Indonesian scholars. His writings form responses to critics of traditionalist ritual customs such as Al-Albani. *Tawassul* is given a lengthy, sympathetic treatment in a recently published Indonesian translation of a number of his *fatwa*.<sup>23</sup>

For Asy'ari, *tawassul* constitutes an offering to deceased Muslims:

When a person uses an intermediary [*berwasilah*], this means that a servant of Allah is seeking the help of Allah through people who beyond doubt have come to have status

20 Al-Albani, *Al-Tawassul*, pp. 29–41.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 41–4.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

23 M. Hasyim Asy'ari, *Sang Kiai: Fatwa KH. M. Hasyim Asy'ari seputar Islam dan masyarakat* (Yogyakarta: Qirtas, 2005).



[*drajat*] and prestige [*martabat*] beside Allah, such as the prophets and saints. These without doubt possess high status, dignity and respect.<sup>24</sup>

Asy'ari points out that the supplication is not being made to the person whose name is invoked, but to Allah. The *wasilah* is approached as 'a servant with a close relationship with Allah, who then beseeches Allah for what we have requested'.<sup>25</sup> These individuals are able to act in this way because 'their souls are more sacred than ours, and their selves are purer than ours on account of what Allah has given them...'<sup>26</sup> Asy'ari defines the class of potential *wasilah* as *nabi*, *para wali* and *orang-orang saleh* (the prophets, saints and pious individuals). Implicitly, deceased ancestors are not part of this class.

*The fifth understanding (non-specialist): Jarah (grave visiting)*

The understandings that motivate non-specialists to perform the *tawassul* are generally not expressed in prescriptive statements, as they usually feel unqualified to make general statements about the *tawassul*. What emerges in the non-specialist's account are personal understandings relating directly to the subject's own environment and circumstances.

I once joined a group for a three-day pilgrimage (Sundanese: *jarah*) by bus to visit tombs in the province of Banten, located at Java's western end. Without exception, *tawassul* was performed in each of the seven tombs visited by our group. I noted some of my fellow travellers making their own written lists of the tombs visited and their occupants. I asked one fellow pilgrim the reason for this, and was told that the names of the occupants of the tombs would later be used in *tawassul* that my fellow traveller performed in a routine fashion within his own home. The *tawassul* would gain efficacy as a result of the contact made at the tomb, and this would benefit himself and the other occupants of his house. By visiting the tomb, he had established a relationship of *perantaraan* (mediation). For this reason, the names of the occupants of the tombs were carefully noted. It was explicitly stated by my friend that a visit to the tomb itself was the preferred means for the establishment of mediating relationships with potent *wasilah*. The *tawassul* is the means of accessing a benefit through that relationship. Implicitly, such a *tawassul* is less effective when a personal visit to the grave of the *wasilah* has not been made.

*Sixth understanding (non-specialist): Routine use in private*

A second friend, employed as a university lecturer in Bandung, prefers to perform *tawassul* before his morning prayer. He started to practise this on a regular basis after the death of his father, and is especially diligent in performing it if he has a need (*kebutuhan*). He used an analogy to explain the workings of the *tawassul*. He said that if he wanted something from me, he would approach me through our mutual friend, for we had not yet developed a deep relationship. He would feel it inappropriate to make a direct approach to me. The same feelings motivate his performance of *tawassul*.

24 Ibid., pp. 132–3.

25 Ibid., pp. 133, 140–1.

26 Ibid., p. 133.

Because he feels *malu* (shy or reserved), he will not directly ask Allah for something, but instead establishes contact with the parties named in the *tawassul*. All these parties are people who have given service to Islam, and for this reason, the Prophet Muhammad is always mentioned first. The second is Abdul Qadir, to whom my friend attributes the bringing of Islam to Indonesia. He laughingly said that he feels there is a kind of nepotism at work here; he is attempting to create favourable relations with certain individuals before asking for something directly to Allah. When describing his own personal performance of the *tawassul*, on a number of occasions, he used both *menghormati* (show respect to) and *meminta* (to make a request from). In other words, he saw himself as praising the figures mentioned while simultaneously seeking fulfilment of his needs through their agency.

When these six understandings are considered side by side, collisions of understanding seem certain. The understanding of Al-Albani, with its limited recognition of humans as *wasilah*, appears to negate all the other understandings. His understanding is approved in some contexts, and the *tawassul* will not be found amongst the religious observances performed within those environments. The reformist organisation *Persatuan Islam* is a group whose understanding of *tawassul* explicitly denies it any normative basis.<sup>27</sup>

It was my experience, however, that the divergence in understandings generally does not intrude into the performance of *tawassul*. The key here is the absence of discursive activity about what is going on in the *tawassul*. Anthropologists have discussed this absence with reference to the *selamatan* (ritual meal). Because express exegesis is not an element of the ritual meal, conflicting interpretations of what is being done do not lead to disharmony in the congregation. In other words, where understandings are not discussed, participants are not troubled by unwelcome meanings that can be attributed to the ritual meal.<sup>28</sup> The *tawassul* is conducted under these conditions, and it thereby receives the assent of a congregation whose interpretations of ritual practice reflect differing positions in the polarity described in the introduction to this paper.

This difference may follow the contours of generational change. The grandparent generation, whose understanding of Islamic concepts may have been received from religious experts in the village environment, may appreciate the *tawassul* as a means of communicating with the spirits of deceased relatives. The motivation is continuation of a state of well-being (*selamat*). Their descendants, schooled in state institutions and tuned in to national media, may feel uncomfortable with this conception, but may instead view the *tawassul* as a statement of respect for the canon of notable Muslims. The *tawassul* allows participation informed by both of these understandings, and the potential conflict is left implicit.

27 A. Hassan, *Soal-Jawab tentang berbagai masalah agama 1-2-3* (Bandung: Diponegoro, 2000), pp. 323–5, 328–33, 516.

28 Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese religion*, p. 43; J. R. Bowen, *Muslims through discourse: Religion and ritual in Gayo society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 317–18.

### **Tawassul and inclusivity**

As noted above, the *tawassul* retains the same syntax (*thumma ilâ arwâh...shai'un li'llâhi lahum*) in the diverse contexts in which it is performed. Variation is evident in the individuals invoked. It was my experience that where local understandings of religious authority underlined the ritual, great variety was to be observed in the figures cited. That is to say, where participants' concern for ritual detail outweighed the need for outward conformity with specifically Islamic symbols and doctrine, the groupings tended to be inclusive, to the point where they challenged orthodox conceptions of religious canon. After all, concern for ritual detail demands careful attention to all those mediators believed to have the potential to be of assistance. In these cases, the invocations to potential mediators tend to pile upon each other in a way that ignores the exclusive boundaries Islam (and other religions) place around their groupings of canonical figures.

This inclusiveness is illustrated in one of the seminal ethnographies written about Indonesian societies. The review of the *adat* (custom) of the Sundanese by Haji Hasan Moestapa portrays a dynamic Islamic society manifesting contrasting understandings of religious authority.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the book's primary focus is on one social segment, the *urang desa*. This is the villager in a community dependent on agricultural production for its livelihood. Many of the ritual observances of this demographic are concerned with agriculture, and are often performed at locations of significance to agricultural production. The invocations made in such rituals respond to the requirements of this activity. The figures and deities invoked are regarded as having the power to influence the unpredictable elements affecting agricultural production. Moestapa illustrates a tendency towards inclusiveness in these invocations, an inclusiveness energised by the dynamic evolution of Sundanese religion:

...the *adat* is very strong in its belief that at a water source or the point where the water enters the *sawah*, especially if these are under a large tree or in a graveyard, there will be an occupier, who creates the power of the place to ward off evils, and who brings forth the prosperity of that place. Because of this, when the farmer wishes to begin farming the place, or beginning to plough the surface, it is obligatory upon mighty and meek, either individually or in cooperation with people who use the same water source, to gather together food and to pray for *salamet* in one's private house, or to carry it in a procession to the water source, to be prayed over, the intention of the prayers being to make offerings to the occupier of the place; to make an offering to the person who for the first time opened the ground in that place; to make an offering to his ancestors [*karuhun*]. The *santri* [expert with scriptural expertise] makes an addition in the form of an offering to all believers and the saints [*para wali*]; also added is the sage [*pandita*] who was the first to have wealth, the King of the spirits, the honoured prophet Sulaeman.<sup>30</sup>

29 Hasan Moestapa, *Bab adat2 oerang Priangan djeung oerang Soenda lian ti eta* (Batavi: Kantor Tjitak Kangdjeng Goepernemen, 1913).

30 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

The invocations pile up in a way that transcends the barriers demarcating religious denominations. A similar example is found in the supplications used in the ritual speeches uttered at circumcisions and marriages:

...the invocations in both [circumcisions and marriages] mention the names of Batara Guru, Guru Putra Hiyang Bangga, and all the deities male and female [*dewa* and *dewata*], all of whom according to Sundanese belief are watching over, guarding and having control over human beings. Added to this are the names of the ancestors, sages [*pandita*], saints and prophets. More are added, for it is characteristic of the Sundanese mentality to do this to the utmost extent.<sup>31</sup>

Although we have no indication of the specific wordings of the performances described by Moestapa, the description strongly suggests the syntax of the *tawassul*. Significantly, the tendency to inclusiveness creates groupings of *wasilah* that suspend the operation of the boundaries marking religious affiliation as Islamic, Hindu or Sundanese.

This inclusiveness is characteristic of a spirituality that is functional in the agricultural context. In the agricultural communities of late nineteenth-century Sunda, and also today to a lesser extent, Islamic knowledge was held as authoritative alongside non-Islamic paradigms of ritual efficacy. The pressure of surmounting the vagaries of the agricultural cycle, through ritual means, was so compelling that the supplicant was loath to omit any deity or figure with the potential to be of assistance. The syntax of the *tawassul* enables broad inclusion of these. In this way, it is the ideal ritual supplication for a community in which the need for identification with a thoroughly conceptualised religious framework is not present.

As noted, the inclusivity lessens as the need for outward conformity with specifically Islamic symbols and conventions grows. The public discourse of Islam in contemporary West Java marginalises the understandings of, to take one example, those who make supplications for agricultural production. For this reason, I observed that the *tawassul* used in contexts exposed to public observation tended to be less inclusive than those used in private. The inclusive *tawassul* are likely to be heard in 'offstage venues of the riverbank, the house, and the hills...' <sup>32</sup>

In the above examples, I am reliant on Moestapa's representation of Sundanese tradition. Yet this is by no means the only source we have about the *tawassul* of the past. *Tawassul* texts are generally preserved in writing. Yet these activities quite often involved *tawassul* that had been recorded in writing. Many written examples circulate in contemporary Islamic society, and many are found in documents utilised in ritual practices of the past. These documents enable our final approach to the *tawassul*; the archive it has bequeathed to us.

### The *tawassul* archive

Very many *tawassul* have been preserved in writing. These recensions are found in the texts utilised in the ritual activities in which *tawassul* plays a role. The opening

31 Ibid., p. 65.

32 Bowen, *Muslims through discourse*, p. 316.

pages of Sundanese narratives of Abdul Qadir al-Jaelani, some of which are mentioned below, display *tawassul* in abundance. They are also commonly found, as *tahlil*, in the souvenir prayer books prepared by families for the death of a recently deceased. Booklets sold at grave sites to assist visitors in performing grave-side supplications will also include *tawassul*, as do the brochures and leaflets made available to followers of the *tarekat*.

The remnant *tawassul* in writing may be seen as forming an archive. Archives are visited by historians on the understanding that the documents contained in them allow a reconstruction of the past. In the same way, fixations of the *tawassul* in writing allow us to obtain an understanding of the texture of the supplication practices holding authority at specific locations in space and time. My awareness of this was mainly gained during my research into Abdul Qadir al-Jaelani *karamat* narratives and their ritual use. I read and inspected many Abdul Qadir *karamat* narratives. The narrative itself displayed little variation from manuscript to manuscript, yet this was not the case with the *tawassul*. Great variety was evident, and while reading these texts I came to approach the *tawassul*, inevitably contained in the opening pages, with heightened anticipation.

And so, for example, it was easy for me to recognise the manuscripts that had been created for use in the *debus* (performance of invulnerability techniques). In an interesting fusion, the invulnerability techniques often associated with Ahmad Rifa'i (died 1182) came to be practised in a ritual performance in which the intercession of Abdul Qadir was sought by the reading of the latter's *karamat*.<sup>33</sup> The invulnerability techniques (Rifa'i) were enacted simultaneously with the ritual *karamat* reading (Abdul Qadir). A number of Abdul Qadir *karamat* narratives in the collection of Leiden University were specifically written in anticipation of the *debus* ritual. This is clear from their *tawassul*, in which 'Ahmad al-Qadir al-Rifa'i' is granted a gift of *al-fatihah*.<sup>34</sup> Rifa'i's profile in Indonesia is minor in comparison with that of Abdul Qadir, and little is known about his popularity in Indonesia. But the remnant *tawassul* archive records his status as intercessor among practitioners of the *debus* invulnerability ritual.

In fact, the *tawassul* archive may provide the only written sources concerning significant parts of Indonesia's Islamic ritual and cultural heritage, for many ritual observances enjoy support in social settings with little need for documentation or written discourse. Grave visiting (*jarah* or *ziarah*) is one such example. The *tawassul* archive provides detail of this observance that may greatly enhance our knowledge of it. An example follows.

#### *Grave visiting and the tawassul archive*

The *tawassul* was the preferred observance at grave sites during the many *jarah* group tours in which I participated.<sup>35</sup> If the group was led by a *kiai* (leader of a

33 Jacob Vredenburg, 'Dabus in West Java', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 129, 2–3 (1973): 302–20.

34 Examples are Codices Or. 6538 (*Wawacan Layang Seh*) and 7823 (*Hikayat Seh*) of the collection housed at Leiden University Library.

35 For discussions of *tawassul* and *tahlil* at grave sites, see T. Christomy, 'Narrative dan ziarah ke Kangjeng Seh Abdulmuhyi, waliyullah fi Safarwadi, Tasikmalaya, Jawa Barat' (Paper presented at the 'Tradisi Lisan Nusantara' seminar of the Asosiasi Tradisi Lisan, 28–30 Nov. 1996, Faculty of Literature, Universitas Indonesia, Depok); Jamhari, 'The meaning interpreted: The concept of *Barakah* in *Ziarah*', *Studia Islamika* 8, 1 (2001): pp. 87–128.

*pesantren*), this person would lead the *tawassul*. In some cases, the *kuncen* (guardian) of the tomb would take the lead. The text of the *tawassul* was usually sensitive to the grave location. That is to say, the occupant of the grave is included prominently amongst those parties gifted with *al-fatihah*. As noted, a visit to the grave is believed by some pilgrims to create a special relationship of mediation which can be invoked in subsequent performances of *tawassul*.

But the *tawassul* does not only invoke the grave being visited. A number of *tawassul* give interpretations of the potency of graves that shed light on the respective roles played in *jarah* practice by place, *wasilah*, historical remembrance and supplicating. What follows are discussions of two paragraphs from a *tawassul*. This one is included in a printed brochure prepared specifically for use at the grave of Sunan Gunung Jati, near Cirebon in the province of West Java.<sup>36</sup> It is also found widely in Bandung, where it is often performed in observances other than grave visiting. I witnessed it being used in the ritual recitation of Abdul Qadir's *karamat*. The fourth paragraph reads:

Next to the souls [*Thumma ilâ arwâh*] of our masters, the people of al-Ma'âlâ and ash-Shubaikah and al-Baqî' and deceased believers male and female and deceased muslims male and female without exception from the east of the earth to the west, on its land and in its seas from the south to the north, may something of Allah's be with them [*shai'un li'llâhi lahum*]: *al-fatihah*

*Al-Ma'âlâ* is a cemetery lying just to the north of the al-Haram mosque in Mecca. 'Here, according to tradition, are buried the Prophet's mother, Amina; his wife, Khadija; and his ancestors, Abd Manâf and Abdul Muttalib, together with a number of the early famous Muslims.'<sup>37</sup> *Ash-Shubaikah* is a quarter lying just to the south of the al-Haram mosque, of which Rutter writes, 'Esh-Shubayka is inhabited almost exclusively by mutawwifs [pilgrims' guides], chiefly those of the Indians, Javans, Bokhârans and Afghans. On the right of Esh-Shubayka, and hidden from sight by the tall houses of that quarter, lies an old graveyard, which has been disused since the plague of A.H. 1326, when long trenches were dug in it to accommodate some of the thousands of bodies which encumbered the streets and houses of the city'.<sup>38</sup> *Al-Baqî'* is 'the oldest and the first Islamic cemetery of al-Madîna ... The Prophet's daughters, his infant son Ibrahim, his wives ... and his descendants, with the exception of al-Husayn are also buried here.'<sup>39</sup>

We may make two observations about this paragraph. First, the famous Muslims buried at al-Ma'âlâ, ash-Shubaikah and al-Baqî' are not mentioned by name. When it comes to supplicating, it is the site that must be invoked. Implicitly, there is less benefit in naming the individuals lying at rest there, even though they are members of the most lustrous lineages of Islam. The *wasilah* is conceived here as a location rather than individual identities. Second, this paragraph is excerpted from a *tawassul* composed for use at the resting place of Sunan Gunung Jati in West Java. Implicitly, the grave of the great saint of Java is an appropriate location for making supplications through the

36 *Silsilah Gunung Jati ma' râtib ul-Haddâd* (Maktabah at-Tamîmî).

37 E. Rutter, *The holy cities of Arabia*, vol. 1 (London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1928), p. 274.

38 *Ibid.*, p.126.

39 *The encyclopaedia of Islam: New edition prepared by a number of leading Orientalists*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1960- ), p. 957.



famous graves of the holy land. It is also implicit that a potent grave in West Java is a more efficacious location for supplicating to famous Arab graves than other locations in West Java. A concept begins to take shape; graves of saints serve as nodes allowing supplicants to access a global network of authoritative grave sites. The nodes are structured hierarchically, however; one cannot imagine the grave of Sunan Gunung Jati being invoked in Medina or Mecca. We see here the outlines of a centre–periphery relationship existing alongside the more canonical framework underlining the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca).<sup>40</sup>

The second paragraph of note from this *tawassul* is:

Next, to the presence [*Thumma ilâ hadrat*] of our master and lord, the Sultan of the saints, Sheikh Sharif Hidayatullah Sultan al-Mahmud, and to the spirit of our lady Sharifah Muda'im, and our lady Nyai Mas Penatagama Pesambangan, and to the spirit of our master and lord Pangeran Cakra Buana and to Sheikh Mursyahadat Illahi, especially to the spirit of our master and lord Sheikh Dhat ul-Kahf and to the spirit of our master and lord Sheikh Bayanullah, and to the souls of all the saints and sultans and people of the grave who lie buried at Gunung Sembung and Gunung Jati and their ancestors and descendants and the people mentioned in their *silsilah* [genealogies] and those who take [lineages] from them. Come to our assistance through the will of almighty Allah! And through the divine favour they possess [*bi-karâmâtihim*] we seek from you divine blessing [*al-barakah*] and intercession and divine favour and approval and well-being, may something of Allah's be with them: (*al-fâtihah*)

In contrast to the first paragraph, this paragraph invokes a local site of authority for the Muslims of West Java. All the figures mentioned in this paragraph lie buried in graves at the cemetery complexes at Mount Sembung and Mount Jati, near the city of Cirebon on the north coast of western Java. The concept of *karamat* is here inscribed on local contexts; the class of Allah's beloved (*aulia'*) includes notable Muslims of Java's northern coast. This inscription is shaped by local history, for all the figures

40 See also Jan Just Witkam, *Vroomheid en activisme in een Islamitisch gebedenboek: De geschiedenis van de Dalâ'il al-Khayrât van al-Ġazûlî* (Legatum Warnerianum, Universiteitsbibliotheek Leiden: Leiden, 2002); *Kleine publicaties van de Leidse Universteitsbibliotheek*. Nr. 50, pp. 63–92.

41 The narrative (or more accurately, one version of it), may be summarised as follows: Prabu Siliwangi, king of Pakuan Pajajaran (Sunda), had three children. Two of these, Pangeran Walangsungsang and Nyai Lara Santang, fled ill treatment in that kingdom and eventually arrived at the village of Pasambangan, where they studied Islam with a sheikh of Meccan origin, Sheikh Datuk Kahfi. Sheikh Datuk Kahfi had arrived from Mecca at Pasambangan along with his younger brother Sheikh Bayanullah. Pasambangan is located between Gunung Sembung and Gunung Amparan Jati. Sheikh Datuk Kahfi advised Walangsungsang and Nyai Lara Santang to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca, which they did. In Mecca, they stayed at the residence of Sheikh Bayanullah, the younger brother of Sheikh Datuk Kahfi. Nyai Lara Santang married a prince in Mecca named Maulana Sultan Mahmud, and took the name Saripah Mudaim. The child of this union, born in Mecca, is named Syarif Hidayat. On his return to Cirebon, Walangsungsang inherits dominion over Cirebon, and thereby initiates the Pakungwati dynasty, and takes the name Pangeran Cakrabuana. Meanwhile, Syarif Hidayat has travelled widely studying and spreading Islam, and eventually establishes a school at Gunung Sembung, taking the title Sheikh Jati. The *wali songo* (the nine saints who brought Islam to Java) appoint him as the *panetep panatagama* (religious authority and proselytiser) for the Sundanese lands. See Dadan Wildan, *Sunan Gunung Jati antara fiksi dan fakta: Pembumian Islam dengan pendekatan struktural dan kultural* (Bandung: Humaniora Utama Press, 2002), pp. 25–39.

named here are actors in the foundational islamisation narrative of West Java.<sup>41</sup> This narrative legitimises the sacred authority of the priestly/sovereign lineages of Cirebon, and the grave sites provide a focal point for this remembrance. But we need to be careful not to make too much of the historiographical quality of this *tawassul*. It is notable that this Islamisation narrative is not explicitly acknowledged in the *tawassul*. Supplication follows paradigms of authority that differ from historical remembrance. The *tawassul* does not give symbolic value to deeds, being oriented instead towards the grave as the locus of prime efficacy. The historical narrative belongs to an earlier phase, secondary in importance to the pressing role of the grave itself in the success of the supplication.

Despite high participation by Indonesian Muslims, customs such as grave visiting and ancestor remembrance are sensitive topics in Indonesia's public sphere,<sup>42</sup> and for this reason little of the expertise and knowledge required by those who practise it has been committed to writing. This is where the *tawassul* archive gains importance. The *tawassul* just discussed is but one example, and should not be regarded as representative, yet it allows us to view interpretations of these activities that are and were operative amongst those who participate in *jarah*.

### Conclusion

The Arabic component of Indonesian Islamic ritual, especially in ethnographic studies, is too often summarily dismissed as 'chant' without consideration of its referential component.<sup>43</sup> In fact, the *tawassul* has much to tell us about the ways in which difference is accommodated in Islamic ritual in Indonesia. As noted, *tawassul* is in large part, an offering, and this no doubt contributes to its popularity, especially amongst the agricultural populace where the making of offerings is considered a routine component of cycles of production. In such communities, the *tawassul* brings the character of Islam to activities that may lack Islamness in the strict sense of the term, for it is always recited in Arabic, and it is conventional that the Prophet Muhammad is the first party to be offered a *hadiah* (gift). It brings a satisfactory 'Islamic' quotient that adds 'religious' value to the highly localised understandings made of plants, food, mythical figures, incense etc in Sundanese (and Javanese) tradition. But it is also given approval by Muslims concerned with outward display of identification with Islamic convention. For these people, it allows an expression of reverence for Islam's canonical figures. Due to this broad appeal, it has left us an archive scattered in the written texts utilised in the cultural activities and religious observances of Javanese and Sundanese tradition. In this archive may be found detailed testimony about the rituals and rites that constitute these traditions.

42 *The potent dead: Ancestors, saints and heroes in contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Henri Chambert-Loir and Anthony Reid (Honolulu: Allen and Unwin / University of Hawaii Press, 2002); Asian Studies Association of Australia: Southeast Asia Publications Series: xvii.

43 The famous example is Geertz, *The religion of Java*, p. 13.