

# False Prophets? Ontological Conflicts and Religion-Making in an Indonesian Court

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## INTRODUCTION

Since 1998, when Indonesians embarked on a process of democratization after more than three decades of authoritarian rule, there has been a sharp rise in accusations of “insults to Islam” and ensuing prosecutions of blasphemy. This chapter examines a blasphemy trial on the island of Lombok in 2010, in which an elderly Muslim farmer from East Lombok was accused of being a “false prophet” (*nabi palsu*) and taken to court. In court, Pak Abdullah alias Amaq Bakri testified that he had visited heaven on several occasions, including the highest seventh level.<sup>1</sup> Yet it was the claim that he had received revelations from the Angel Gabriel, a key figure in the Islamic tradition, that court officials and religious authorities found particularly troubling. Besides challenging mainstream understandings of prophesy in Sunni Islam, local authorities worried that other Muslims might be misled to assume that divinity might crop up anywhere

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and within anyone. While the prosecutor demanded a one-and-a-half year sentence, the judges on the District Court ruled that a one-year prison sentence was sufficient since the accused was of an advanced age, did not have a prior criminal record, and declared himself willing “to return to the true Islamic teachings”<sup>2</sup>. Considering that blasphemy carries a maximum penalty of five years imprisonment, the sentence was relatively light.<sup>3</sup>

Trials of the kind that Amaq Bakri endured involve ontological conflicts and clashes. Probing some of the conflicts involved in this case, I argue that blasphemy trials constitute a “religion-making” (Mandair and Dressler 2011) technology geared toward the creation of a distinctly Indonesian conception of “religion” (*agama*), while rendering certain forms of religiosity illegal. By ontological conflicts, I mean disagreements involving substantially different experiences and assumptions about the world, including the relations between the various kinds of beings and entities making up the cosmos, what defines the nature of and difference between humans, animals, spirits, and so forth. At stake in this trial, I suggest, was a concern to sharpen the boundary between the time/space of prophesy in Islam and the present, processes that accentuate the otherworldliness of divinity and protect Muhammad’s status as the last prophet. Hence, this trial invites questions such as: “How do incommensurate worlds emerge? How are they sustained in their incommensurability?”<sup>4</sup> In other words, an ordinary Indonesian criminal trial may enable better understandings of how the inconceivable is conceived.

Though I characterize the conflicts described in this chapter as involving ontological conflicts, my argument is not that the protagonists in this trial—a semi-illiterate Sasak Muslim farmer, Salafi-inspired preachers, lawyers, and judges in the civil court—inhabit different “worlds”, some fully inhabited reality distinct from other equally distinct realities. While claims for incommensurable “worlds” are made by influential proponents of “the ontological turn”, the post-humanist strands of the turn strike me as being methodologically and theoretically problematic. Here I have in mind approaches that reject the humanist project of theorizing difference within a shared humanity, in favor of multinaturalism and perspectivism, positions developed by Viveiros de Castro and Holbraad among others.<sup>5</sup> For instance, in the introduction to *Thinking Through Things* (2007), Henare, Holbraad, and Wastel announce that: “[T]he presumption of natural unity and cultural difference—epitomized in the *antropos*—is no longer tenable. If we are to take others seriously, instead of reducing their articulations to mere ‘cultural perspectives’ or ‘beliefs’ (i.e. worldviews), we can conceive them as enunciations of different ‘worlds’ or ‘natures’” (2007, 10).

In what follows I attempt to take my interlocutors seriously, an endeavor that requires sensitivity to the ways in which they are differently positioned in the trial situation and to the kind of work being accomplished in the highly charged setting of a blasphemy trial. In placing the accent on what is generated through practice—on effects rather than intentions—I take inspiration from perspectives that reject a priori notions of essence and focus on enactment, and the formation of entities in assemblages or networks of humans and nonhuman entities (Latour 1993, 2010; Remme, Chap. 5). Relying on specific genres of speech, precedents, and evidence, the criminal trial both reflects and enacts forms of selfhood in which the individual must take responsibility for his or her intentions and actions, including speech.<sup>6</sup> Assuming that courts are exemplars of what Latour (1993) calls “the modern constitution”, I suggest that courts are important albeit often overlooked sites of contemporary “religion-making”. Tracing the genealogy of “religion” (*agama*) in postcolonial Indonesia, I show how judges participate in the construction of the time/space of original prophesy as an inaccessible realm.

The dream visions that Amaq Bakri reported in the courtroom challenge mainstream understandings of Islam and the “real” by claiming intimate encounters with beings who are distinctly “other”—spirits, angels, and the divine. Everyone in court would likely agree that these beings are situated across an “ontological divide” (Keane 2008, 120), in the sense that they take the “difference to be a qualitative one, as between kinds of things, rather than [...] simple spatial distance”. Of course, such distinctions are not necessarily clear. What was at stake in this blasphemy trial concerned the kinds of relationships and communication that can take place across such a divide and under what circumstances. By ruling that the time of revelation is over and that no ordinary human can communicate across this divide, the judges made quite a radical move. With this ruling, the judges participated in the construction of a wholly different realm, cordoning off the time/space of original prophesy from the immanent here and now. If some proponents of ontological anthropology might be suspected of flirting with ideas of radical alterity, this verdict made the veracity of incommensurate worlds integral to the natural order of the state. By lending legal power to a particular conception of Sunni Islam, the judges further entrenched a theo-political formation in which the lines between the “political” and “religious” are becoming increasingly blurred.

## NEW PROPHETS?

The ambition “to take others seriously” is arguably a *leitmotif* for those proponents of the ontological turn who seek to reinscribe difference at the heart of the anthropological project. According to Viveiros de Castro, “anthropology is the science of the ontological self-determination of the world’s peoples, and that it is thus a political science in the fullest sense” (2003, 18). As he notes, the “language of ontology” is also introduced for a “tactical reason” as a countermeasure to the “derealizing trick frequently played against the native’s thinking, which turns this thought into a kind of sustained phantasy, by reducing it to dimensions of a form of knowledge or representation, that is to an ‘epistemology’ or ‘worldview’” (2003, 18). In line with this, Holbraad argues that the ontological approach to alterity “gets us out of the absurd position that what makes ethnographic subjects most interesting is that they get stuff wrong” (2010, 184). What such an impasse implies, the argument goes, is that we have reached the conceptual limits of our analytical concepts—hopelessly mired in Eurocentric dualist assumptions like body and mind, experience and reflection, signified and signifier—and hence are doomed to fail “to take others seriously” (Henare et al. 2007, 10). For Holbraad, conceptualization thus becomes the critical task of an ontological approach in anthropology (2010, 184).

I have no quarrel with the idea that “ethnography should be used to rethink our analytical concepts” and Holbraad’s (2010, 184) proposition that “such a task effectively inverts the very anthropological project” is intriguing (but see Bråten, Chap. 12). When Henare et al. (2007) advocate an approach that takes “things encountered in the field as they present themselves” (2007, 3), this is simultaneously a methodological and political claim that aims to generate concepts that go beyond Western metaphysics (see Venkatesan 2010; Bertelsen and Bendixsen, Chap. 1). It is also a proposal for approaching ethnographic difference in terms of radically different ontologies, or “strong ontologies”<sup>7</sup>. “The promise of ontological anthropology”, as Holbraad et al. (2014) recently announced, “resides not only in the ways in which it may help to promote certain futures, but also in the way that it ‘figurates’ the future in its very enactment”. Moreover, this endeavor is permanently revolutionary, in the sense of being geared toward the politics of “indefinitely sustaining the possible, the ‘could be’” (Holbraad et al. 2014). The tenor of this and similar statements has led some critics to characterize ontological anthropology as an “unmoored form of speculative futurism” (Bessire and Bond 2014, 441).

Picking up on the eschatological tone in the new anthropology of ontology, Scott's (2013) brilliant mini-ethnography concludes that this project turns anthropology into "religion science". What characterizes this emerging "religion science", Scott suggests, is a rejection of "the allegedly wonder-occluding ontology they name Cartesian dualism" in place of "something like conversion to the allegedly wonder-sustaining relational non-dualism they impute to indigenous animisms—often intriguingly, with the aid of reference to a wealth of Western philosophers, writers, artists, even scientists" (Scott 2013, 861). Despite what the new prophets of this "religion science" advocate, this analysis will address Amaq Bakri's wonder-filled experiences and his court case, without positing the existence of "worlds" separated by incommensurable difference but rather by uncovering difference within a shared world.

### RELIGION-MAKING IN INDONESIA

Being concerned with the production of blasphemy in contemporary Indonesia, I am dealing with an unstable phenomenon at the intersection of law and religion, with a complex genealogy. The Muslim farmer who was put on trial clearly spoke from experiences and assumptions that differed from the more formally educated Muslim and non-Muslim actors involved in the trial. Yet I stress that these differences are forged in dialogue, not through isolation, giving evidence of the deep plurality *within* Islam in Indonesia, a sprawling archipelago nation in Southeast Asia with more than 240 million people, 900 languages, and the world's largest Muslim population. As Keane (2014, 312) points out, "any community supposedly identified with a 'single' kind of Christianity is likely to contain conflicts and divisions due to the different logics and temporalities associated, respectively, with ecclesiastical institutions, popular practices, and scriptural texts. These conflicts may extend even to basic ontological assumptions". That observation equally applies to Islam, a proselytizing monotheistic religion that has been present in "the lands below the winds" (Reid 1988) and in what is now the Republic of Indonesia at least since the fourteenth century. Conflicts over heresy and false religion have shaped the historical development of both traditions (Ginzburg 1992 [1976]; De Roover 2011). Today such issues may take on a global significance, as the Rushdie affair and the so-called caricature debates illustrate.

Religion qualifies as an "essentially contested concept" (Gallie 1964). The concept has all the definitional vagueness of other truly powerful



discursive constructs. Talal Asad (1993), among others, has criticized efforts to define religion as a universal and transcultural phenomenon, pointing out that universalizing definitions of religion have tended to privilege belief. Steering clear of all attempts to essentialize religion or its supposed counterpart, the secular, Asad “follows Wittgenstein’s recommendation to look for ‘use’, not ‘meaning’” (Mandair and Dressler 2011, 16) in his genealogical approach to religious formations. Asad’s point that the privileging of belief tends to carry much normative baggage is useful to keep in mind when turning to Indonesia. Being sympathetic to Asad’s position that an essentialist definition of religion is not viable, I do not attempt to define religion for the purpose of this chapter, which is mainly concerned with legal forms of “religion-making”. The following sketch gives examples of “religion-making from above” (Mandair and Dressler 2011, 21), a heuristic concept that refers to the authoritative discourses and practices that define and confine things as “religious” through the disciplining means of the state and its institutions.

Since the Republic’s founding in 1949, after a long struggle for independence from the Dutch, state officials have put much effort into defining what counts as legitimate religion. Indonesia is not a religious state, nor can Indonesia be described as a secular state in the conventional sense of the term. The 1945 Constitution commits the state to support religion, and belief in One God (*keTuhanan yang Maha Esa*) is the first of five principles (*Pancasila*) constituting the Republic’s ideology. In the early 1950s, the Ministry of Religion began to work out a more precise definition of what qualified as religion. As *agama*, a Sanskrit loanword, was elevated to the status of religion, the term was dissociated from both “law” and “tradition”, which was one of its original senses in Sanskrit (Picard 2011b, 5). According to the Ministry, “a religion would have to be revealed by God, possess a prophet and a holy book, have a codified system of law for its followers, and further, it should enjoy international recognition and not be limited to a single ethnic group” (Picard 2011b, 13). In 1965, Sukarno signed a Presidential decree on the Prevention of the Misuse/Insulting of a Religion, which specified that six religions (Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism) were legitimate and that deviations from their “core” tenets would be punished.<sup>8</sup> In 1969, the decree was upgraded to the status of law, and is generally known as the Blasphemy Law. During Suharto’s New Order regime (1966–1998), which legitimated itself as saving the nation from falling into the hands of godless Communists, Confucianism lost its status as a legitimate religion.

As the above discussion suggests, the Indonesian concept of *agama* is a hybrid concept, drawn from several linguistic and historical traditions. A cornerstone of the New Order policy was the distinction between *agama* and adherents of so-called mystical beliefs/streams of belief (*aliran kepercayaan*), a broad category of groups that were lumped together through what they purportedly lacked. The latter were regarded as “people who do not yet have a religion”, and associated with backwardness, parochialism, and suspected of being subversive. The official endorsement of depoliticized forms of religion conveyed the idea that “*agama* is progressive (*maju*) and a requisite of good citizenship” (Kipp and Rodgers 1987, 23), and it was religious affiliation, rather than other identity markers that were printed on people’s ID cards. A telling illustration of the regime’s attitude is a regional commander who in 1974 was quoted in *Tempo* magazine as saying: “I do not care which religion they have, as long as they have one” (Bubandt 2011, 185). As Hefner (2000, 59) notes: “Regime strategists looked to organized religion as a ground for public morality, a shield against Western liberalism, and an antidote to Communism”.

With the collapse of the New Order regime in 1998, the government’s grip on the bureaucratic regulation of religion was relaxed, albeit to a lesser extent than many had expected. In the early Reform (*Reformasi*) period when Indonesians began experimenting with democracy, the scope for expressing different forms of religiosities widened considerably.<sup>9</sup> Scholars have documented a rise of movements of eclectic, non-denominational spirituality, especially among the urban middle class, as well as renewed interest in devotional forms of Sufism, often promoted by televangelists and celebrity preachers (Howell 2005; Rudnycky 2010). But it did not take long before concerns were raised about the harmful effects unregulated religious pluralism was bound to have on individuals and the nation’s well-being. Such concerns were raised within different sections of the *ummat*, perhaps most vocally by the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI), which in 2005 launched a campaign against “deviant sects” (*aliran sesat*) and ideas.<sup>10</sup> During the National Congress in 2005, one *fatwa* declared that “secularism, pluralism, liberalism” was incompatible with Islam, and referred to these foreign ideologies by the acronym *sipilis*, the Indonesian term for syphilis. While leaders of the major Muslim mass organizations criticized the Council for issuing this and other divisive opinions, several Islamist organizations were positive. The leader of the Indonesian Council of Predication (DIII) was quoted in *Jakarta Post* saying: “We have to vaccinate our congregation to prevent them from this

*sipilis* virus”, and vowed to “fully support the MUI in its war on deviant thoughts”.

Among the developments that the Council saw an urgent need to stop was the rise of a Jakarta-based Sufi Muslim group initially known as Salamullah, whose female leader Lia Aminuddin claimed to be a medium for the Angel Gabriel, whom she later married. This small group became widely known after members distributed thousands of letters containing copies of the Angel’s revelations, which also urged self-purification by renouncing corruption and doing good works (Howell 2005). In 2006, and again in 2009, Lia Aminuddin was arrested and convicted under Indonesia’s Blasphemy Law. This is one of a rising number of cases since 1998 in which people who identify as Muslims have been prosecuted for blaspheming Islam.<sup>11</sup> The groups targeted in such cases tend to be small, local groups with no international network support, and the prosecutions usually take place after the MUI has issued a *fatwa* against the group (Crouch 2014). In response to this rise in prosecutions, a coalition of non-governmental organizations and prominent Muslims petitioned for a constitutional review of the Blasphemy Law, which they argued was being misused to criminalize religious difference and harass adherents of minority religions. In 2010, after a public hearing, the Constitutional Court upheld the Blasphemy Law, stressing the importance of protecting religious teachings from defamation and the role of the state in guaranteeing religious harmony and public order (Bagir 2013; Crouch 2014).

## BETWEEN REVELATION AND DEVIANCE

In 2009, text messages alleging that a man from East Lombok claimed to be a “prophet” (*nabi*) began circulating on Lombok. Similar messages, distributed anonymously, urged people to be alert against “false prophets” (*nabi falsu*) and others spreading “deviant” (*sesat*) teachings. According to a journalist based in Mataram, the provincial capital, these widely circulating text messages created a stir among the island’s Muslims, many of whom were shocked that anyone would make such a preposterous claim. Shortly after these messages appeared, government officials convened a hearing to ascertain if his understandings of Islam were legitimate or not. As I discuss elsewhere (Telle, [under review](#)), prior to this hearing, a group of Salafi preachers carried out a covert investigation into his “beliefs” and passed on their findings to the MUI. Below I give some examples of the exchanges during this pre-trial hearing, in which village officials,



bureaucrats from the sub-district, officials in the Ministry of Religion, high-ranking state officials, police officers, and several journalists took part.<sup>12</sup>

The man who was called to testify was Amaq Bakri, a farmer who ekes out a humble living cultivating vegetables in the foothills of the Rinjani volcano in northeast Lombok. I was not present during this hearing, but my sources recalled that he had been cooperative and talkative, his answers occasionally eliciting bemused laughter. But a low-ranking village official said that he had felt very uncomfortable and angry with the government officials who insisted on addressing Amaq Bakri using Indonesian, despite the fact his command of the national language is poor. Besides making him appear stupid and uneducated, this meant that many questions were misunderstood. This miscommunication possibly went beyond language, involving a failure to fully fathom the performative weight of words in this quasi-legal confessional situation. On the other hand, Amaq Bakri probably saw little reason to guard his words: After all, he was a practicing Muslim whose life had been transformed by a series of remarkable encounters in the “invisible realm” (*alam ghaib*).

Being asked to explain the purpose of the Islamic obligation to fast (*puasa*) during the month of Ramadan, he answered that the goal of fasting is to become “satisfied” or *puas*, a reply that departs from common renderings of fasting as training the ability to abstain from lust. He further explained that there are two kinds of scripture: The Holy Qu’ran that scholars (*ulama*) and students study in Arabic script and an “inner” scripture that he carries deep within himself, and whose contents may only be divulged under certain conditions during Maulud, the month when Muslims celebrate the birth of Prophet Muhammad.<sup>13</sup> Speaking in Sasak, he also recalled his journeys into the “invisible realm”, which included glimpses of the highest seventh level of paradise (*surga*). In referring to these journeys, he used the term *mi’raj*, the term used in Islamic sources to describe the Prophet Muhammad’s mystical ascent, commonly known as the Night Journey (Graham 1977). In 1970, he had traveled on a yellow drum. On his second trip in 1975, when entering the “invisible realm” through a well, he had seen the spirits of the dead. On his third journey in 1997, the Angel Gabriel (*Malaiikat Jibril*) had taken him on a tour of paradise before giving him a “diploma” (*ijazah*) to certify that he had graduated from the lengthy apprenticeship.

Being compelled to speak about Islam, Amaq Bakri dwelled on his transformative encounters with Muslim figures and various spirits inhabiting

the invisible “in-between” realm (*alam barzakh*). This realm, also known by Sasak speakers as the “other world” (*alam* or *dunia kedua*) or simply the “invisible world” (*alam ghaib*), is the space where the dead and other spiritual beings reside and that the living may temporarily visit, for example, when they dream (Telle 2000; Hay 2001). An important concern for many Sasak is to maintain the appropriate distinctions between the domain of living human beings, the spirits of the dead, and the various nonhuman sentient beings inhabiting other domains, including Muslim spirits (*jin*) and non-Muslim ones (*jin kafir*). Precisely because humans and various spirit-beings share the same cosmos, inhabiting different yet potentially interpenetrating domains, it takes sustained effort to maintain the appropriate distinctions and boundaries. Remme’s discussion (Chap. 5) of Ifugao ontological dynamics as being “chronically unstable” has some resonance with Sasak efforts to avoid being possessed or overpowered by spirits, processes that may lead to a depletion of life-force (*ruh*), and ultimately death (Telle 2007b). As beings from the “invisible world” tend to be invisible for humans, their presence can be difficult to discern. One consequence of this perceptual difficulty is that Sasak are inclined to relate to the physical world as being saturated with potentially meaningful “signs” (*tanda*) that require some ethical response by individuals, families, or larger collectivities (Telle 2007a, 2009). However, the perceptual difficulties involved in relating across ontological difference imply that there are often disagreements about what is going on, and consequently, what might be the appropriate ethical response. Ongoing processes of Islamic reform have sharpened such disagreements, which are sometimes adjudicated in the civil courts.

In light of this lively two-way traffic across a permeable ontological divide, Amaq Bakri’s claims to have visited the highest level of paradise where he met the Angel Gabriel, are certainly unusual but entirely conceivable. But rather than locating these experiences within an animist Sasak life-world, I want to suggest that the possibility of such encounters is found within Islam. As a “religion of the book”, Islam is built around the premise that Divine revelation is a historical fact and the Qur’an is often taken as the tangible evidence of this occurrence.<sup>14</sup> The possibility of similar occurrences being repeated is therefore perfectly conceivable, which partly explains why generations of Sunni theologians have kept insisting that Muhammad was the final prophet and that new revelations will not be forthcoming. But as this testimony indicates, these efforts have not been entirely successful. A key figure in the Islamic tradition, it was the Angel

Gabriel who transmitted the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad, who is said to have received the revelation as sounds (Graham 1977). On his part, Amaq Bakri claimed to have received a "diploma" (*ijazah*), a token and sign of his "inner" transformation. The replica that he had a student in graphic design make, served as a souvenir for remembering the encounters with the Angel and for conveying these intangible experiences to others. As such, the "diploma" evoked a relationship stretching from heaven to earth, linking the divine and a Sasak farmer. As these narrated experiences were sufficiently similar to accounts of prophecy in scripture and the broader Islamic tradition, they elicited interest as well as serious concern.

By opening a space for divine inspiration, Amaq Bakri's testimony of encounters with the Angel Gabriel exceed the boundaries of "reason" (*akal*). A concept derived from Arabic (*'aql*), Muslims in Indonesia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia tend to take "reason" to be what distinguishes humans from the rest of the animal world, and this special gift from God can be developed through study and the observance of Muslim prayer and discipline (Peletz 1996). While this testimony challenges prevalent distinctions between "reason" and "passion", "divine" and "human", it clearly emerges in dialogue with the Islamic scriptural tradition. To convey his experiences, Amaq Bakri used vocabulary that people in his milieu were likely to recognize, such as idea of mystical ascent (*A.mi'raj*). Muhammad's paradigmatic Night Journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and through the various heavens where he met earlier prophets and came close to God, was thus imbued with Sufi-inspired and idiosyncratic significance.<sup>15</sup> While this capacity to identify with the Prophet's spiritual travails, which culminated in the Night Journey, had given him a small coterie of loyal followers, the "modernist" bureaucrats who organized the hearing found this identification to be offensive, a case of improper innovation (*A.bid'a*). In 2013, Amaq Bakri said that he regretted that the sub-district head had cut him off in a rude manner, barring him from sharing more insights. Despite having been tried and imprisoned, he still assumed that these extraordinary experiences could move even the most skeptical interlocutors.

In thinking about how to comprehend narratives of such experiences, which hold that certain dream visions involve access to the divine, I find Amira Mittermaier's (2011) work on dreams and the imagination in contemporary Egypt inspirational. In Islamic eschatology, the *barzakh* refers to a space where the spirits of the dead dwell before Judgement Day. Mittermaier turns the *barzakh* into an analytical optic for thinking about the "in-between", loosely conceived as "modes of being in the world that

circumvents the rule of the either/or” (2011, 4). In so doing, she builds on Crapanzano, who takes inspiration from the classical Sufi philosopher Ibn al-‘Arabi, to suggest that the *barzakh* can be conceived as a “constitutive space-time” or “the betwixt and between” located between two or more ways of being in the world (Crapanzano 2004, 6; 57). By taking the “in-between” as an ethnographic object *and* as an analytical tool, Mittermaier seeks to illuminate “modes of being in the world that are not easily intelligible from within rationalist secular vocabularies but that nevertheless are of political and ethical relevance” (2011, 4). Much as dream visions embrace ambiguities, such that a “dream-vision can both originate in the dreamer and come from an Elsewhere” (2011, 239), she refrains from stamping out this ambiguity by subjecting her material to the binary logic of either/or (real/imagined, traditional/modern, prophetic/wishful thinking). These moves have some affinity with Povinelli’s concern to develop an “anthropology of the otherwise”, as discussed by Bertelsen and Bendixsen (Chap. 1). Dream-stories are thus used to open up alternative understandings of the imagination, which not simply entail other ways of dreaming, but other ways of being in the world and relating to others.

Rather than ontologizing difference by positing the existence of “worlds” separated by incommensurable difference, this analytical move aims to uncover difference *within* a shared world. In subtle but important ways, Mittermaier’s analysis departs from the postulate of multiple ontologies, that, in its most radical form, would appear to erect sharp boundaries between hermetic “worlds”, confining people and things to stable essences (Keane 2009; Vigh and Sausdal 2014; Frøystad, Chap. 10). Rather than presenting dream-stories from an exclusively emic point of view (both a theoretical and methodological impossibility), or suggesting that they form some form of self-contained dream culture, Mittermaier treats dream-stories as “always already engaged” with other discourses (secular, rationalist, religious, psychoanalytical, etc.). Yet by showing how her interlocutors grapple with an “alterity that remains radically inassimilable but that nevertheless compels and moves the dreamer” (2011, 5), this analysis of dream-visions in Egypt deftly points to alternative ways of engaging with alterity. Inspired dream-visions, and what Derrida (1995) called the “wholly other”, are thus shown to be a vibrant site of revelation as well as contestation.

What sets Mittermaier’s analysis apart from the proponents of “strong ontology” introduced earlier is precisely the insistence on the “in-betweenness” of dream-stories as “always already engaged” with

multiple discourses. Historical entanglements and modern discourses tend, however, to be erased from the picture by influential proponents of ontological anthropology, whose project therefore runs a serious risk of distorting empirical diversity. It is surely difficult to square the dynamics of the Indonesian pre-trial hearing I have described or the dreamscapes Mittermaier uncovers in contemporary Egypt with Viveiros de Castro's suggestion that "anthropology is the science of the ontological self-determination of the world's peoples" (2003, 18). Even a superficial exploration of a concept such as the *barzakh*—which is highly significant for both Indonesian and Egyptian Muslims—suggests significant overlaps as well as profound disagreements, with consequences for how people act and respond to ethical dilemmas. To the extent that Sasak would regard themselves as a "people", a defining feature would most certainly be their Muslimness. This suggests that the "strategic essentialism" championed by Viveiros de Castro holds little promise when dealing with groups who identify with translocal historical formations such as Islam.<sup>16</sup> Lurking behind the language of "ontological self-determination", is a broader narrative of Western modernity as being founded on a regime of representation that involves a distinction between model and reality, a knowledge–power regime that has yielded mastery over nature and (non-Western) natives, but also estrangement and a disembedding of life from previous unities (Keane 2007; Scott 2013).<sup>17</sup> By marshaling a version of this narrative of Euro-American disenchantment, which hinges on particular assumptions about representation, proponents of ontological anthropology run the risk of reproducing the dichotomies they set out to critique. Rather than "taking others seriously", this analytical move, I argue, easily ends up misrepresenting and standardizing alterity by portraying "others" as little more than inversions of "ourselves".

Besides compelling a citizen to confess, I suggest that the broader objective of this pre-trial hearing was to sharpen the divide between this world and the other-worldly Divine realm. While the participants harbored very different experiences as well as assumptions as to how blurred or absolute this ontological divide might be, they were hardly strangers to one another. For instance, years before Amaq Bakri was called to testify in court, he had met ridicule and skepticism, and during the New Order era, army personnel would occasionally give him a harsh beating to teach him to be a "good Muslim". Thus, he was perfectly aware that many fellow Sasak Muslims are dismissive of the possibility of visitational dreams and spiritual journeys. On their part, the Salafi-oriented preach-



ers who initiated a preliminary investigation into his “beliefs”, introduced themselves to their host by pretending that they had received dreams and supernatural “signs” directing them to seek him out as a teacher (Telle, [under review](#)). To me, such self-reflexivity and intimate familiarity with other points of view and ways of being Muslim, suggests that we are dealing with ongoing processes of self-formation, othering, and differentiation, in which the “other” is located as an imaginary presence within the self. This universal human capacity to place oneself in the position of others may also involve “strategic empathy” (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015) for the purpose to deceive, harm, or kill the other.

The testimony of Amaq Bakri appears to have upset many officials who took part in the hearing, who suspected that what they had heard probably qualified as a case of blasphemy against Islam. However, before the criminal procedure was initiated, arrangements were made to send him to Selagalas, a psychiatric hospital in the provincial capital. Over a three-week period, the elderly farmer was subjected to a number of psychological tests. According to Amaq Bakri, “Mr. Doctor said I was not crazy (*gila*). He could not find anything wrong with me”. While he was pleased to be declared sane and in good health, this meant that he was fit to stand trial for blasphemy. Shortly after being released from the hospital, he was arrested by the police and imprisoned. By this time, the East Lombok chapter of the MUI, a semi-independent body of Islamic scholars, had already issued an opinion (*fatwa*) declaring that his “new teachings” (*ajaran baru*) “deviated” from Islam.<sup>18</sup> Although the opinions of this religious body are not binding on the state, the Council’s opinion was, as I will show in the next section, much referred to in the final judgment that was handed down by the civil court.

## CREATING INCOMMENSURABLE WORLDS IN COURT

Stories of inspired dream-visions offer glimpses of the Divine in surprising places. Because such stories question established religious and official authorities, they can upset those who claim an exclusive right to define what constitutes “true Islam”, which in Indonesia is the state. At stake in this trial, I argue, was a concern to firmly separate the time/space of original prophesy in Islam from the immanent here and now, processes that underline the radical alterity of Divinity while simultaneously ensuring Muhammad’s status as the final prophet. In certain respects, these objectives exemplify the work of “purification” that Latour (1993) has

identified as being characteristic of modernity, largely conceived as an artificial dualist taxonomy. However, in other respects, Latour's actor-network perspective fails to illuminate key dynamics of this case. Latour's signature intellectual move in his actor-network theory has "been to flatten all entities onto a single plane" (Harman 2014, 90). By making all entities equally "real", this maneuver is of limited help in accounting for differently valued zones of reality and different kinds of beings. I argue that in Indonesia, blasphemy trials, conceived as a "religion-making technology", are laboratories for the production of radical alterity.

Having studied the 35-page court decision (*putusan*) that the judges on the Civil Court in Selong, East Lombok, produced, I am struck by the confidence they display when speaking of what religion is.<sup>19</sup> That is, they operate with a rationalized conception of "religion" (*agama*) as a distinct set of beliefs, doctrines, and activities that are firmly grounded in scripture. Moreover, they assume that there is a near-perfect overlap between the legal notion of *agama* and a modernist understanding of Islam as a revealed religion (*din*) whose scriptures are subjected to a particular literalist interpretation. For example, the decision notes that despite the fact that the accused insisted on "being Muslim", his interpretation of the Confession of Faith (*basmallah*) "differed from its original meaning" (*berbeda dengan aslinya*). More seriously, they reasoned, "he seems to believe that his dreams in 1970, 1975, and 1987 amounted to a mystical ascent (*mi'raj*) and a meeting with the Angel Gabriel, and other matters that violate the teachings of Islam, the religion to which the Defendant and Muslims in general adhere" (2010, 30).<sup>20</sup>

The judges in this blasphemy trial, as in similar criminal trials taking place across the country, are trained in the canons of secular civil law, not in Islamic jurisprudence or theology. As already noted, Indonesia is not an Islamic state, but contemporary Indonesia illustrates how religion, "conceived as an isolable object has become a mode through which political power operates" (Hurd 2015, 11). Not being experts on Islam, the judges—two Balinese women and one Javanese man—followed standard court procedure by calling "expert witnesses" (*saksi ahli*) to identify what constitutes the object of Islam. Their choice fell on representatives from the Ministry of Religion and the MUI despite the fact that the East Lombok chapter of MUI already had denounced the "new teachings" as blasphemous. Not surprisingly, these experts agreed that the accused's testimony during the trial deviated from what is written in Islam's core texts, notably the Qur'an and Hadith (the corpus of the Prophet's sayings and doings). Of course, the judges might have used their authority to invite

other experts, but this choice ensured that a consensus would quickly be reached.

The opinion (*fatwa*) issued by the East Lombok section of the MUI figured prominently in the decision, and it is worth quoting parts of the opinion because it illustrates how this reading of the scripture identifies the time/space of the revelation as a gradual historical unfolding toward completion, which comes to an end with Muhammad. One section of the *fatwa* explained that “according to core Islamic doctrine, the Angel Gabriel only descends to Prophets (*Nabi*) and Rasul (*Messengers*) to impart God’s revelations (*Wahyu Allah*) and the Prophet Muhammad is the final messenger (*Nabi terakhir*). Hence the Angel Gabriel does not descend to provide humans with more revelations (*Wahyu*)”. After quoting several verses from the Qu’ran, the *fatwa* concludes that, “not even a single verse suggests that the Angel Gabriel still has the task of bringing new revelations to humanity, be it in the form of new teachings (*ajaran baru*) or to clarify existing teachings because God’s revelation is already perfect and complete (*sempurna*)”. Besides suggesting that the Qu’ran is the preeminent if not singular source of knowledge of Islam, this opinion subjects scripture to a literalist interpretation, and insists on the unsurpassable gulf separating humans from the Divine. Insisting on God’s absolute transcendence, the verdict denied the possibility of communication across this divide, and thus construed a realm so radically different as to be inaccessible to humans. While some Muslims would criticize such pronouncements as illustrating the limits and hubris of narrow “reason” (*akal*), I think the judgment also illustrates that radically different worlds are made, not given, and therefore emergent and subject to change.

This theological opinion figured prominently in the decision, which rephrased those sections of the MUI-*fatwa* which emphatically insist that no more revelations are forthcoming. Using this opinion as their standard, the judges reasoned that Amaq Bakri’s claims to have received divine inspiration clearly was in conflict with Islam, and had made his followers inclined to consider him a “prophet” (*nabi*). Without even a nod to the *internal* diversity among Muslim scholars in Indonesia or beyond, they ruled that the accused had clearly strayed from the “true” Islamic teachings and was therefore guilty of blasphemy against Islam (*penodaan terhadap agama Islam*). Noting that the guilty man probably had limited abilities and means to spread these misguided teachings, they accepted his pledge “to return to the true Islamic teachings” as a mitigating factor when deciding the length of the sentence. This verdict illustrates how

a particular theological conception easily becomes the metalanguage or standard when courts of law decide what legally counts as religion, as opposed to “false” or heretical belief (De Roover 2011).

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has suggested that courts and modern legal institutions are an important, albeit somewhat overlooked, site of contemporary “religion-making” (Mandair and Dressler 2011). Rather than seeing blasphemy trials in Indonesia as an exception to an ostensibly “secular” norm of modern statecraft, I have argued that these trials reveal how modern state power routinely turns “religion” into an object of politics (Asad 1993; De Roover 2011; Hurd 2015). While the blasphemy trial Amaq Bakri endured was unique, this case also illustrates the pivotal role of law in defining the boundaries of religious life, not only in Indonesia but also in late modernity more generally. By criminalizing those who are accused of spreading “deviant” or “false” religion, the state is producing “religion” as a singular sacred object which can be insulted or defamed, a project that also entails inscribing divisions between good and bad citizens.

A common thread that runs through ontological anthropology is a bold ambition “to provincialize forms of power within the modern project while co-creating vital alternatives to them” (Bessire and Bond 2014, 441). Being concerned with what qualifies as blasphemy in contemporary Indonesia, I have examined a phenomenon at the intersection of law and religion. Using the East Lombok trial as my case, I have argued for the importance of keeping our definitions of religion open and elastic, while recognizing the fundamentally historical character of religious practices. Given the high stakes involved in such trials, where repressive state power is used to enforce particular conceptions of religious truth, it is clearly important to destabilize religion discourses and refrain from language that has the potential to feed a potentially lethal politics of religious difference. Ontologizing difference seems too risky. Proponents of ontological anthropology are inclined to celebrate the life-worlds of those who supposedly are untainted by the malaise of modernity. Ironically, the prophets of the emerging “religion science” (Scott 2013), such as Viveiros de Castro or Holbraad, have a proclivity for seeking out “pure” ontologies, an inclination shared by many modern religious movements and state-led “religion-making” projects. This move runs the risk of collapsing existing differences in the world “into versions of just one big opposition, that is, into inversions of

ourselves” (Keane 2007, 12). Thus, self-proclaimed ontological anthropologists can be criticized for standardizing relational nondualisms and homogenizing modernity (Scott 2013; Bessire and Bond 2014). Despite centuries of efforts to standardize and purify Islam in Indonesia (Ricklefs 2007), Indonesia’s 200 million Muslims are expressing their faith in ever more diverse ways. While influential institutions, both state and religious, will probably continue to patrol the boundaries of “true” Islam, other Indonesian Muslims will likely continue to find traces of the divine in their dreams and everyday lives and hold open the possibility for truly revelatory events.

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## NOTES

1. I have chosen to use his real name/title rather than invent a pseudonym. The case is closed and I hope this work may be useful to scholars and activists who are concerned with the rising number of convictions for blasphemy in Indonesia.
2. The Indonesian court decision reads, “kembali kepada ajaran Islam yang sesungguhnya”. Putusan Nomor:24/PID.B/2010//PN.SEI.
3. This chapter draws on fieldwork carried out in 2012 and 2013, hence I was not present during the pre-trial hearing or the trial. I have carried out more than two years of fieldwork in Indonesia, initially working with Sasak in Central Lombok and since 2005 also among the island’s Hindu Balinese minority.
4. Povinelli also raises these questions in her review article (2001).
5. Vigh and Sausdal (2014) and Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2015) provide good overviews and methodological critiques of these strands of the ontological turn. See also Bråten, this volume.
6. See Brooks (2000) for an analysis of the interplay between religious and legal forms of confession, which extends Foucault’s work on the disciplinary aspects of confession.
7. Proponents of “strong ontologies” appear to assert a “fundamental reality independent of any representations of it, and sufficiently self-contained as



to yield no significant overlap with any other reality” (Keane 2013, 196). He wryly notes that despite the asserted incommensurability of worlds, “anthropological proponents of strong ontology appear to understand shamans; moreover, their readers are unsurprised by this”. Vigh and Sausdal (2014) raise similar methodological objections. See also Sivado (2015) for a philosophical critique of the anti-representationalist list stance proposed by Henare et al. (2007).

8. See Picard (2011a) for an analysis of how Balinese worked with the Ministry of Religion to mold Hindu Balinese traditions into a form of monotheism that would be acceptable to the Ministry.
9. In 1999, Abdurrahman Wahid, then president, proposed to abolish the Ministry of Religion on the premise that it entailed undue interference in religious affairs, but the proposal failed to gain momentum (Crouch 2014).
10. The MUI was set up in 1975 as a semiofficial religious body under the Ministry to Religion to guide the Muslim community. Since 2002, when the Council declared itself independent of the government, it has edged toward the conservative end of the Islamic spectrum, winning favor among Islamists, see Bruinessen (2013).
11. In this chapter, I am concerned with the criminalization of disputes internal to Islam, but there are also many cases in which Christians have been convicted for blaspheming Christianity or Islam, see Crouch (2014) for discussion of the historical trends in court cases.
12. This hearing, held on 13 October 2009, had the status of a *Muspika (Musywarah Pimpinan Kecamatan)* and involved staff from Bakorpakem, an intelligence body tasked with monitoring of groups who are suspected of deviating from orthodox religion.
13. The allusion to the “true” or “inner” Qu’ran within the body is quite reminiscent of the symbolism and anthropocentrism of popular Javanism. As Beatty (1999, 161) notes, “Even the Qu’ran is a secondary, outward thing derived from a ‘true’ original; and that original is not the Preserved tablet of Islamic dogma, the inaccessible treasure of a remote God, but the human form itself, the ‘wet Book’ (*kitab teles*) of the living body”.
14. This is inspired by Keane’s (2008) analysis of how scripture-based religions are highly portable and how the decontextualized quality of scripture provides semiotic grounds for the existence of an authority that transcends any particular context.
15. The Night Journey is described in the Qu’ran, sura 17 (Al-Isra), in the hadith literature. There is extensive discussion of this journey in early Sufi literature, and the Prophet’s ascension has often been taken as a model to be emulated by Muslims, see Colby (2006).

16. See Bessire and Bond (2014) for a critique of how the critical claims of ontological anthropology depend on disavowing the complex temporalities of indigenous South American societies, which result in an “artificial standardization of alterity itself” (2014, 443).
17. See Latour (2010) for one version of this critique of the Moderns and their “cult of the Factish Gods”.
18. A *fatwa* is a nonbinding pronouncement by a qualified Islamic legal scholar on an issue, belief, or practice. In Indonesia, a *fatwa* is not recognized as an official source of law by the state or the civil courts (Crouch 2014).
19. An English translation of the court decision and the MUI *fatwa*, with my commentary, will be posted on the Politics of Religious Freedom Project’s open access webpage later in 2016.
20. I suspect that the correct year is 1997, not 1987. Of course, this would not make a difference for the verdict.

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