

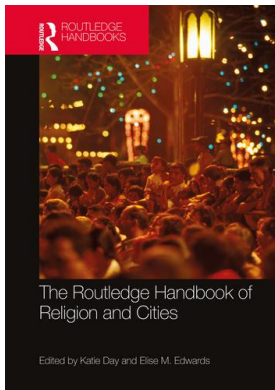
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14

THE EPHEMERAL CITY

Indonesian piety on the move

James Edmonds

Fifteen to 20 times a month for the last 20 years, tens of thousands of people have converged in the cities, towns, villages, rice fields, and stadiums of Asia and the Middle East to soak in the performance of Islamic devotional prayers (*selawat*) led by Habib Syech bin Abdul Qadir Assegaf. These events have traveled across Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, and parts of the Middle East, forming ephemeral cities with durable and tangible impacts to the global Islamic landscape. The events bring Muslims from previously contentious backgrounds, politicians, and religious leaders together as they seek “blessings,” “peace,” “piety,” “a calm heart,” and power. Street vendors sell food, perfume, Fanclub gear (Syekhermania), glow sticks, and a cacophony of other products. The stage at the center of the event acts as a beacon around which the temporary city of *selawat* swirls. These sensory performances of Islamic piety explode into both urban and rural spaces using, reconfiguring, and being reconfigured by both urban and rural elements. Unlike much of the literature concerning the making of cities by religious architecture, practice, negotiation, and vice versa, these events are not stable.¹ They are ephemeral impositions into rural and urban space, transcending and creating new boundaries between diverse populations, political powers, and Islamic sensibilities.

These cities are not the creation of the Chicago or LA School of Urban Design. The routes, trajectories, or sidewalks of these cities cannot be mapped because they change every night according to the environment. These cities descend on spaces that already have relationships with bodies, politics, histories, and the dead. Speakers often nestle betwixt and between trees vibrating with the thunderous sound of Habib Syech and his musicians. The stage is a different size and shape, depending on the location. The density of these cities and their ephemerality make them very difficult to govern. The rapidity at which the cities circulate also places them firmly in the flows of global capital, politics, and global Islam. However, the uniqueness and particularity of the local event are what drive the continual creation of these ephemeral cities.

I take Edward’s Soja’s “radical challenge to think differently, to expand your geographical imagination beyond its current limits” while not pouring “old wine into new barrels” seriously in grappling with these formations as ephemeral cities that challenge paradigmatic knowledge of space, the city, and urban environments.² At the center of this paper is a reflection on how conceiving of my field sites as cities is productive in challenging the assumed object of study for much of the field of religion and the city: urban space. Why is urban space the object of analysis for looking at the relationship between religion and the city? I would rather argue that a city

and its relationship with religion is not marked merely by long-standing architectural elements that stand as in the landscape. A city is located, in my work, in the space of the contemporary: “The contemporary is a moving ratio of modernity, moving through the recent past and near future in a (nonlinear) space that gauges modernity as an ethos already becoming historical.”³ The village in the forests of Indonesia and the metropolis of Jakarta are both a part of the contemporary and impacted by the ratio between tradition and modernity, always already becoming historical. The durable elements of the city surrounding the stage of *selawat* are not ahistorical, but they are also not static. They are always moving and adapting, even as tradition plays a part in this moving ration of the contemporary. Within this space of the contemporary, these events are, furthermore, not simply an example of multiple modernities. I follow Foucault and others in envisioning modernity as an ethos within the space of the contemporary. These cities are not one singular example of an alternative to Western urban spaces. They are firmly located and engaged with this similar ethos, which seeks to separate, order, and universalize the world. Therefore, *selawat* is entangled in the same ethos of other phenomena, cities, and contemporary life. Approaching *selawat* as an ephemeral city in the space of the contemporary allows for alternative visions of the interplay between the city and religion.

Rabinow argues that there are two particular archeological points in the intellectual history of urban planning that are significant in understanding how this ethos of the contemporary has acted on urban planning as a field and the city as an object of study. Technocosmopolitanism and middling modernism seek to not only regulate the institutions and spaces of the city but also attempt to erase difference in a vision of the modern metropolis that sees difference “as a point distributed on a statistical continuum.”⁴ Yet, I am not interested in showing how colonialism, globalization, and the modern state are further attempting to regulate and order differences and traditions in the pathways of the city in the name of progress. I am interested in the tactics of everyday people who challenge the prevailing notions of the city and religion. This chapter analyzes these ephemeral cities as places in which tradition and modernity interact to form new possibilities for understanding the city and religion.

Greeting the forest

Habib Syech, other members of his entourage, and I got in his large van. This was my third trip to Indonesia to follow the city. I had already attended over 75 of these events and had become a part of the entourage. Habib Syech has millions of followers across the world. He was born in Indonesia in 1961 to a Javanese mother and a Hadhrami father. He was previously a merchant in Mecca and preached around the island of Java until 1998 when he began performing *selawat*. From 1998 until the present, Habib Syech has traveled the world performing *selawat* to millions of people. His popularity has exponentially grown over the last 20 years, creating new flows of global capital, Islamic authority, and ways of being Muslim. However, during my fieldwork, I developed a relationship with him and *selawat* that facilitate my presence at these mobile celebrations of music, devotion, and leisure.

He informed me that it would take five or six hours to drive to the event. Joking with the driver, I asked if he was ready. He said, as he usually did, “O, I am always ready, Jimi.” Habib Syech always sat in the front passenger seat. Over the five years that I spent traveling with him, I never saw him sleep. I asked others about this, and they also indicated that he never slept. When I asked him, he said that he even paid for business on a flight to Hong Kong, but he was still not able to sleep. I usually sat right behind him to interview him about a wide variety of topics. On this trip, I wanted to push him on how and who pays for *selawat* in order to understand how the multiplicity of participants, performers, and material elements temporarily manifest.

Me: How long have you been with Davin Sound?

Habib Syech: I have been with them for ten years or more. Before them, there was another sound system from Kudus. However, they did not improve their sound system. The owner bought a new house, and we would have continued to use the company from kudus, but kudus did not want to continue.

Me: Why? The money was good.

H.S.: Well, he got money and bought a house and other things. Davin is already capable and able. The money is a lot, but the responsibility is great. He buys new microphones, or if there is something that is broken then he buys a new one. I do not have to use Davin. If someone is better than Davin, then I will choose them. If there is not someone better, than ya, I of course use Davin. For me, I use Davin because he already knows me, and I know him. He is always helpful. Because of the sound system, stage, and other things having to do with *selawat*, there are a few hundred people who get work. They get money from this work. However, the money comes from Davin. The person who has a stage makes money because people rent the stage. The person who rents it has a job. The person for the person who has the stage also gets a salary. So, all the people involved, hundreds, get money.

Me: Now, the other night I saw many people with cameras who were not a part of Davin's sound crew.

H.S.: Those are not our cameras. Those are the cameras of other people who make videos of the events. We have sound system and video together. The other people with cameras are making videos to sell.

Me: Do you also have videos that you sell?

H.S.: No, I used to make and sell videos, but now I let other people make videos.

Davin's sound system team are not the only people who make money off of the events. When you arrive at any event, whether it is in a rice field or stadium, people are renting out the space in front of their homes for parking, as there is typically never enough parking for 30,000 people. The roads leading to the events and surrounding the events are surrounded by merchants selling food, drinks, hermit crabs, CDs, DVDs, perfume, and a wide variety of other things. These merchants follow the events across Indonesia, often never seeing their families for months at a time.

After four hours of trying to ask as many questions as I could come up with, we were met by several police vehicles that would escort us to the final destination. There is excitement in the air as we swing open the side of the van and, in a rolling stop, someone jumps in to help guide us. We follow the police cars, but the person directing us to where we are going seems to have a different opinion of the correct route. The police escort, however, was moving us through traffic at a healthy pace. We traveled another 30 minutes with a police escort through roads flanked by thick jungle. We slowed down and turned left onto a dark road. At this point, we had a long line of motorbikes, buses, cars, and dump trucks following us, waving flags. We were immediately met by another car, but the road was not wide enough to allow more than one car at a time. The police car sat with its flashing lights at the front as the motorbikes surrounded our van. There was nowhere to go. A man ran out of his house with some boards to help widen the road. The road was flanked on both sides by ditches, but the man seemed confident that the boards would assist in enabling the cars to pass one another.

The roads and other infrastructure that surrounds the events are often insufficient to facilitate the movement of tens of thousands. This was not the only time that a road had to be widened.

In more urban environments, roads for one to three miles turn into parking lots. People leave their cars in the road and walk to the events. In more rural locations, those planning the events often have to buy or rent land for the year because the farmers cannot use the land after the event. Rice fields become mud pits and irrigation canals collapse under all of the foot traffic.

The driver slowly navigated the planks on the side of the road as the police car sped ahead to clear the road. We quickly ascended the hills on the way to the event. The road had large potholes, and I watched as the motorbikes slowed down and wove all over the road behind the van. Tropical trees hung low over the road, but I began to see additional police lights. We emerged into a large rice field. The stage was set up in the middle of the road. Cars could not pass around the stage from either side, and a massive crowd stood up to greet the van. We exited the van. Police officers, as well as members of the Islamic militia, Banser, and Habib Syech's Fanclub, Syekhhermania, formed a barrier on either side of a walkway formed by wood and cardboard. The mud was enveloping the cardboard. I attempted to walk toward the stage, but my shoes became stuck and hidden in the mud. One of my friends, who was a member of Syekhhermania, saw what was happening and grabbed me to help. We both laughed as several other people jumped in and picked me up out of the mud. I was now shoeless for the rest of the event. We stopped at the house of the individual hosting the event. The house was connected to an Islamic boarding school. Fruit and snacks sat out in the open air of the house. I sat down pushing away mosquitos and gnats. Ants, gnats, and other bugs ran across the food.

In order to provide snacks, food, and drinks for the city that formed in this rice field, the food had to come from farther away. Habib Syech visited with the man who owned the house and paid for the event. This was a very short visit as it was already around 8:00 p.m. People had begun showing up at three in the afternoon. There were no temporary toilets anywhere; so, if you needed to go to the bathroom, then you used the woods. This was a common occurrence at the events. In some places, people would rent out their bathrooms for people to use. However, there were never enough bathrooms. A police officer once pointed at a bush and told me it was fine to use the bush. He laughed as I said, "yes, but everyone can see."

After meeting with the organizers of the event, I walked barefoot to the stage and took my place with the musicians on a lower stage facing the main stage. The crowd sat on top of boards placed in the rice field. The crowd extended in the same way that the rice fields were staggered. Fences in-between the different levels of the rice fields kept people from pushing forward, but the moment that Habib Syech walked onto the stage, the crowd exploded. People pushed through the fencing; they snapped any wooden infrastructure made to contain them. Habib Syech implored them to sit. The lights from the stage danced around the field, illuminating the flags and the people who moved in the field, waving their arms. Banser and the police tried to keep the crowd contained, but they were not able to get into the crowd because it was packed so tightly. This became even more dangerous as the individual religious teacher who had invited Habib Syech went into an excited and ecstatic state. He ran around the stage and yelled at the crowd to sing with Habib Syech. It was unusual to have someone running around the stage. Habib Syech laughed. This made the crowd even more challenging to control as police and other security officials attempted to regain control. The bass from the drums reverberated through the crowds, extending into the attentive forest. You could see the leaves of the trees shaking to the sound of the speakers nestled near the forest. I was nervous because the ecstatic religious leader now descended from the stage and was breaking down the barriers intended to keep the crowds from pushing forward. The stage that I was on was only a few feet off the ground, and we were now surrounded by people. One of the musicians leaned over and said,

“Jimi, keep your belongings close or they might be stolen.” The musicians pushed me into the center of the stage and away from the sides.

The stage that Habib Syech was on with 25 or 30 people was shaking. The crowd was standing. The man who was running around on stage and in the crowd was up front screaming and throwing his arms in the air. He seemed to be experience bliss and peace at the same time. Habib Syech began throwing fruit and water into the crowd. The man experiencing ecstasy grabbed a water bottle, ripped it open, and sprayed it over the crowd. This water and fruit were understood to be blessed, containing *baraka*. Many came seeking *baraka*, a blessing. As the water glimmered in the air above the crowd, the stage began to sway with the movement of the bodies around it. I was nervous, but there was nowhere to go. The crowd was not under control. Habib Syech eventually gave up telling people to sit down or stop waving their flags because others could not see. The city had become chaos, right on the brink of destroying the structures at its very center. In this chaos, however, I looked around to see smiling, ecstatic faces. People continually told me that these events brought their heart peace, even when surrounded by thousands of people.

The last song of most events in Indonesia was the National Anthem, but the second to last or last song at all these events was *Ya Nabi Salam 'Alaika* (O Prophet Peace Be Upon You). The order of the songs of *selawat* and their place during the events is not set; however, Habib Syech would always play a popular song *Ya Hanana* (Ya our Bliss) toward the middle of his events and conclude with *Ya Nabi Salam 'Alaika* at the end of the night. It is in this moment that one woman recounted to me that she felt the embrace of Prophet Muhammad, squeezing her worries away. For many present, the veil is lifted between this world and the next, marking this city as an experience of heaven on earth.

The city does not disappear at the conclusion of Habib Syech's performance. The chaos, trash, and stage must be taken care of after the events. As part of these events, Islamic boarding school students and members of Syekhermania are charged with cleaning up the city. The amount of trash is astounding. Glow sticks, water bottles, confetti, plastic mats for sitting on, smartphones, food wrappers, diapers, and other trash are left behind. Indonesia is not known for having trashcans readily available, but, following every event, members of the crowd clean up the city. Every scrap of trash is collected and sent off to a landfill site or burned. It takes two hours or less for the sound crew to disassemble the stage/stages and pack their trucks. There are marks of the bodies that inhabited the space, but the city is gone. The space has returned to whatever it was before. The fields return to fields marked by a soccer goal. The stadiums are ready for their next event.

This city scene is not unusual. This city is reconfigured every night. Sanitation, health, commerce, and infrastructure are negotiated, overrun, and possessed by the thousands of bodies that arrive. Vendors flanked the huge crowd and made a place for this performance, usurping the infrastructure in place. Mud took my shoes, and fences were no match for the bodies of participants. The participants were, furthermore, not simply members of the local community. Many had traveled for up to 14 hours to reach this city. However, many spent extra time trying to find the site as they only had an area, no address. They had to depend on following the crowds, lights, and sounds to find the event. This mobile city usurps the place in which it is built, and yet the ground upon which it is built threatens to suck in the event. The challenges for urban events are different. Blockades are built around the city to reformulate roads, and traffic becomes completely still for hours on end as people spill from the location of the events into the road, seeking the pilgrimage city. The boundaries between socio-economic, Islamic, and political backgrounds converge in a way that challenges an understanding of Indonesian Islamic piety restricted to particular Islamic groups (NU and Muhammadiyah) or places (urban and rural). These particular urban/rural cities, however, have only appeared in the last 20 years.

Building the city

This phenomenon did not always begin as a massive city. It began in the mosques and houses of Indonesian Muslims across Central Java. In these initial iterations of the city, Habib Syech remained at the center. He was the core around which these events circulated. However, he was also shut out of many mosques in Java because “the Javanese were not interested in hearing Arab sermons.” Habib Syech is Hadhrami. His mother is from Java, and his father is from the Hadramout. When Habib Syech’s father passed away, he was in Mecca, acting as a merchant. From a very early age, he was accustomed to traveling around the world. He returned after his father died. He began traveling to mosques to recite the Quran and give sermons in 1997 and 1998. However, he had the door shut in his face more than once. His uncle then suggested that, rather than preach, he should perform *selawat*. His popularity developed slowly. He recalls initially performing for one or two people. These types of performances by individuals other than Habib Syech take place throughout Indonesia. Groups of musicians play drums and tambourines singing songs about the Prophet Muhammad, the afterlife, and the greatness of Allah. The performance of *selawat* has a long history in Indonesia and an established structure. These usually revolved around a life event, such as the launching of a business, wedding, or a meeting to discuss the Quran or other Islamic knowledge, *pengajian*. Islamic boarding school students, *santri*, often learn to play *selawat* for Mawlid al-Nabi al-Sharif, the commemoration of the birthday of Prophet Muhammad. The performance of *selawat* by Habib Syech is not in and of itself sufficient for the formation of the city. However, the city forms out of this phenomenon, which has a robust tradition in Indonesia. The roots of this city are not primarily in the circulation of goods. The Islamic tradition of *selawat* forms the foundation of this evolving and ephemeral city. In terms of when this performance of *selawat* moves or develops from a phenomenon that fits into the long-standing tradition of *pengajians* is difficult to determine. No one moment defines the formation of this city. Different iterations of the city blend with the traditional structure of *selawat*. However, from multiple interviews with hundreds of people over a five-year period of time, the years 2007–2009 marked a few important changes.

In 2007, Habib Syech hired a driver. This driver continues to drive for him today. There is no fixed salary for the driver, but Habib Syech takes care of all of the driver’s needs. Habib Syech recently sent him to Mecca for Umrah, a pilgrimage to Mecca not during the pilgrimage month. It was also in this period (2007–2009) that the Central Javanese government purchased a bus to help facilitate the movement of Habib Syech’s musicians. He currently has three different groups of musicians in different towns across Central Java. However, in 2019, the bus fell into complete disrepair. It was also in this time period that Habib Syech’s Fanclub, Syekhermania, took shape. This was also the period of time that the sound/light/video recording company Davin Sound System entered the scene; it is still currently the sound system that Habib Syech usually uses. They are responsible for all of the sound, lights, and stage setup. Davin sets up the veins that give life to these cities. They have ten or more trucks that travel to each event to set up mere hours before the event. They carry their own massive generators to power all of the speakers, lights, and cameras. This mobile city requires an enormous amount of power and, oftentimes, there is no power source that can provide the energy they need. Davin also at times has to help power the lights that illuminate the merchant tables. The merchants can at times ask to power from a house, but houses are not always close by, and they must pay for electricity upfront to the person who has the house, as there is always a concern that the merchants will not pay for what they use.

Besides power, the prior system that is necessary for ensuring the formation of these cities is transportation. The importance of this feature of the city cannot be understated as GPS did not

work in Indonesia in 2007. Even when I first attended the events in 2015, GPS was not accurate or all that helpful. So, the drivers within the transportation system must also be the same, because it is only through their knowledge and relationship to other participants that the events come together. For example, one night, while I was traveling in the bus with the musicians, we got lost looking for the events. The 25 musicians in the bus then texted and called various other people including the sound crew, organizers of the events, and friends to try and find the event. Eventually, we were instructed to meet someone at the center of a nearby town who could then direct the bus driver. Habib Syech is always escorted by a police car, but the police car is almost always directed by a member of the local community who can tell him where to go. Although these cities often amass tens of thousands, they are not easy to find. The first element in the formation of these cities is not simply transportation, but transportation by individuals who know other members of the city. Although these cities do not often form in the same place twice, the cities often possess certain urban and rural settings through Indonesia, and the more connected the drivers, transportation, and members of the city are to the members of those urban and rural spaces that the city will temporarily possess, the easier the building of the nightly city becomes.

The circulation of this city also makes transportation itself a part of the city. I slept, ate, and lived on buses, planes, and by the side of the road. My body was constantly moving with the other bodies as we were never still. Stillness, furthermore, was often marked by a restaurant or roadside stand that the musicians or Habib Syech liked. If I slept in a bed, it was often in someone's home in a room packed with bodies sharing one bathroom. The musicians even had a saying, "eat, sleep, *selawat*." Eating and sleeping took place during transportation, while the city came together for a few hours at night before dissipating and moving. This is circulation *par excellence*. Everything must move every night, often across nation-state boundaries. For example, I flew with Habib Syech and his entourage to Malaysia for one night and then returned the next day to a different city where the city would be formed again. This raises the question of governance that is at the heart of Foucault's *Security, Territory, and Population* and Rabinow's technocosmopolitanism and middling modernism. Ensuring the circulation of goods, people, and ideas is not the central problem of this city. Circulating is at the very heart of what makes this city possible, and any governance of that circulation would potentially destroy the city.

Circulation is a given in this city, and activities such as building the city become pious action coordinated through Syekhermania. Driving a bus, picking up trash after an event, building the stage, and creating the infrastructure for a city are not only mundane actions necessary for the performance of *selawat*. They are also actions devoted to trying to attain blessings from God. However, these blessings are not an Islamic equivalent to Weberian understandings of the Protestant work ethic. Pillars of Islamic celebration, material exchange, breakdowns in social norms, and impermanence characterize these cities.

Governing the city

As we will see, this circulation creates an impossibility of policing or governing. Stealing is a very big issue at the events, and the only tactic that the city center, the stage, has, is to simply state that people come to steal, and everyone should be aware of their belongings. When fights break out or there is a medical emergency, the density of the city makes it nearly impossible for the police or Islamic militia to reach the fight/issue. A woman who passed out during one of the events had to be carried by members of the crowd to the edge of the crowd, but there was no way for an ambulance to enter even at the edge of the crowd. I am not certain what happened

to the woman. This also indicates an important way in which these cities are changing religious practice. The governance and policing of these events is not done by the police. There are typically a few police officers, but, for example, even in Kalimantan, where the police sponsored one of these events and had military security in place, the Islamic militant Banser was present to help govern the events.

Banser and its youth wing, Anser, are double the size of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI).⁵ They, furthermore, have individual branches in places like Taiwan. This transnational Islamic militia has played a significant role in recent Indonesian history, including the mass killings of communists in 1965–1966. These Islamic militias are associated with Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest independent Islamic organization in the world, known for their inclusion and support of local traditions in the practice of Islam. They police these events. Although members of Banser may deny it, I have seen some of them carrying guns at the larger events. They act as a human shield between the crowds and Habib Syech (at times, I have also had to ask Banser to help me move in the crowd as I have been overwhelmed by the crowd grabbing my belongings and my clothing). Policing becomes simultaneously a necessary component of these events and a pious activity. However, this is still not a feature of the development of a system of sovereignty that ensures the flow of commerce. In addition to Banser, associated with Nadhlatul Ulama, the FPI, Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders Front), also help police the event. FPI is known in Indonesia for committing violence against Muslim minorities such as the Ahmadiyya and Shia. One of the most brutal acts of violence was the dragging and beating to death of Ahmadiyya Muslims in West Java.⁶ These individuals have a somewhat different interpretation of Islam than NU, although they overlap in their acceptance and support of Sufi forms of piety. They are Salafi in their rigid interpretation of the Quran while still supporting things like visiting the graves of famous Islamic figures. Those police officers who do assist at the events are often Muslims who have articulated to me that it is an honor to escort Habib Syech. One of the police officers even secured a custom license plate for Habib Syech. Policing, whether it is from Banser, Anser, FPI, or the police itself, becomes a pious activity that has no central sovereign.

Commercial beginnings

One of the other central components of any city is commerce, and this is the other significant change in the 2007–2009 period. Syekhermania creates a market for the circulation of goods. Habib Syech already had a factory making sarongs and some other clothing, but after the creation of Syekhermania, Habib Syech creates Fanclub gear, including jackets, shirts, scarves, Islamic skull caps, and recordings of his music. This may at first appear to be a purely financial move, but, as indicated in the above example, many people benefit from this. Habib Syech does not hold a copyright on the Syekhermania logo. Many people will make them for their local communities. He does not force anyone to purchase his logo. He also does not make recordings of himself anymore as others already do, which provides resources to those who produce the recordings. As the city develops, Habib Syech does not seek to control the flow of commerce, but rather hopes the circulation of commerce will continue through the multiple merchants and members of his Fanclub without expecting any financial benefit.

In addition to the Fanclub gear, Habib Syech has recently created his own brand of water, Syekher Water. In order to buy this water, you have to go to an agent, a member of the Syekhermania Fanclub, who has their own Syekher Water shop. Habib Syech does not rely on established networks of circulation. He does not, for example, sell his water in the Indomarets

or Circle Ks of Indonesia or elsewhere. He relies on the rapidly circulating city to ensure the circulation of his water to urban and rural communities. Motorbikes stacked with five cases of water wobble through the streets and highways of Java in order to reach their distant destinations. The city ensures the circulation of its goods to other cities through a network that only exists because of this city. You cannot buy this water online. You have to use the established networks of Syekhhermania to buy the water. This mixes commerce and piety for both spiritual and monetary benefit.

Transnational identity

Habib Syech created Syekhhermania with several individuals who followed him from 1998. This Fanclub was made, partially, as a response to the many different groups who claimed to be the Fanclub of Habib Syech. There were only a few things that defined this group: 1) a love of *selawat* of Habib Syech; 2) a love of the Prophet Muhammad; 3) a complete aversion to any stance on politics. Syekhhermania and the events of *selawat* are purposefully anti-political. Even as governors, heads of state, and local politicians sit on the stage with Habib Syech, Habib Syech is careful to indicate that he does not support or condone any political party/person. For example, at one of the events, a local politician tried to show up without his opponent who was running for election in that village. Habib Syech requested that if one of them was going to come to the event, then both should be present. This self-conscious rejection of party politics separates *selawat* from conceiving of this city as an embodiment of political Islam. To clarify, this city does not propose political identity and action based on Islamic principles or nationalism as its defining feature. This ephemeral city has opened up the possibility of the gathering of contradictory politics, religious sensibilities, and ethnic/national identities.

This city is built on multiple continents in different nation-states. This city is not simply a multi-cultural and multi-religious city that exists in Indonesia. It appears in Hong Kong every two years, Malaysia twice a year, Taiwan once a year, and other countries depending on the availability of his schedule. How, then, do those attending understand this city connected to notions of nation-state and Indonesian identity? In places such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, the primary attendees are Indonesian maids and factory workers. However, in the Hadramout, Egypt, and Thailand, many of those building and converging on these cities are local people. An erasure of difference is not at the heart of this city nor the huge diversity of participants able to be annotated as points on a spectrum. New populations of people from a diversity of backgrounds inhabit these cities, which take on new types of identities according to their location.

Toward a reorientation of religion and the city

How, then, do these ephemeral cities allow for a “geographical imagination beyond its current limits?” In conceiving of the coagulations of *selawat* performed by Habib Syech as cities with multiple physical locations, the city is not tied to an individual geographical location. The architectural mainstay of this city is the stage, but the stage and layout of the event is never replicated in each iteration of the city. I could have, furthermore, analyzed this phenomenon as a festival, concert, or ritual practice, and *selawat* resonates with each of these categories. Yet there is a durability and a stability to these events that make them possible. This durability includes the establishment of temporary infrastructure that reconfigures and is reconfigured by the spaces that they possess. Small roads become highways and parking lots. These roads, however, are also often not sufficient for handling the crowds. Wooden planks and creative driving allow for this infrastructure to become usable. Generators produce electricity for the stage while merchants

tap into the local electric system to bring this city to life. These cities carry their own economic systems with them through traveling merchants and Syekhhermania. The police and Islamic militias attempt to govern these cities by mixing devotion and governance. The development of infrastructure, governance, and economic exchange of this ephemeral city is layered onto the places that they inhabit. The city of *selawat* merges with the village, city, or urban metropolis to form a brackish melding of the stationary place and mobile city. The components of each city operate together to form the temporary appearance of *selawat's* city. The geographical possibilities are these layered cities that not only reveal what is necessary for building new cities, but also the interplay of multiple cities in the same space.

This melding of cities, however, is not only for the experience of collective experience, music, leisure, or pleasure. Participants travel to these cities as sites of pilgrimage seeking *baraka*, blessings. As I have argued elsewhere, participants want to be present at these events to attain *baraka* that I have defined as “the infinite possible manifestation of gifts, not dependent on reciprocity, from God in both the visible and invisible world impacting the spiritual, economic, and social lives of people.”⁷ They are seeking gifts from God that are never guaranteed in their participation in building, governing, and exchanging within the city. This generates the act of building, governing, and exchanging within the city as pious activities connected to receiving *baraka*. This does not excise the mundaneness of setting up a stage or a stall for selling merchandise, but making this city is a religious act mixed with the everyday creation of cities that are not confined to urban space.

The result of this brackish city that blends piety and the everyday in order to create the possibility of experiencing *selawat* and *baraka* by millions of Muslims and non-Muslims across the world does not result in bracketing difference or regulation of institutions. Local merchants can sell their products in the same way that traveling merchants are allowed to sell their products. Muslims from contentious Islamic sensibilities mix in the city that does not allow for regulation or institutional solidifications. Non-Muslims arrive to participate in this city as well as religious and governmental leaders from local and national governments. The crowd does not separate into factions or neighborhoods that one might see in modern cities. This city, furthermore, does not create a transnational identity interested in participating in nation-state politics. The possibility of temporary manifestation of this layered city is made possible through seeking a host of gifts that blend the everyday and piety that, in turn, remake building, governing, and exchange within the city as pious acts. These layered cities furthermore challenge a vision of the city as confined to urban or cosmopolitan space. These enchanted geographies merge in rice fields, stadiums, roads, and metropolises, expanding a geographical imagination beyond the spires of churches, domes of mosques, and pathways of a city. The city of *selawat* reveals the need for further imagination regarding the definition of a city as a space in which contemporary life brings in elements of the traditional and modern city. The ephemeral city, however, does not reflect a singularly unique phenomenon. Rather, this city reveals the way in which religious communities are subversively engaging with an ethos of modernity that seeks to categorize, differentiate, and institutionalize life and create mobile, pious cities that both engage with this ethos and create new organizational and religious potentials.

This ephemeral city furthermore suggests that the physical creation and maintenance of a city could be the expression of piety in itself. *Selawat* does not continue without its ephemeral city, and the appearance of this city is also the appearance of piety that is not confined to traditional models of Islamic piety in the spaces of mosques and other Islamic gatherings. Building, governing, and ensuring the circulation of economic goods in the city is a manifestation of city-creating-piety that not only reframes the city but expands the potentials for attaining *baraka* and acting as a Muslim in the modern world.

Notes

- 1 Katie Day, "Urban Space and Religion in the United States" (*Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, July 2017). Irene Becci, Marian Burchardt, Jose Casanova, *Topographies of Faith Religion in Urban Spaces* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). Lara Deeb and Mona Harb, *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi'ite South Beirut* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).
- 2 Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-imagined Places* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), p. 2.
- 3 Paul Rabinow, George E. Marcus, James D. Faubion, Tobias Rees, *Designs for the Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 2.
- 4 Paul Rabinow, "France in Morocco: Technocosmopolitanism and Middling Modernism" (*Assemblage* 17 [1992]): p. 56.
- 5 Darul Amri Lobubun, "Segini Jumlah Pasukan Banser di Indonesia Saat Ini, Lebih Banyak dari TNI" (*Tribun Makassar*. September 9, 2017. Accessed 2 November 2019. <https://makassar.tribunnews.com/2017/09/09/segini-jumlah-pasukan-banser-di-indonesia-saat-ini-lebih-banyak-dari-tni>).
- 6 "Kronologi Penyerangan Jamaah Ahmadiyah di Cikeusik," *Tempo*, February 6, 2011. Accessed November 13, 2019. <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/311441/kronologi-penyerangan-jamaah-ahmadiyah-di-cikeusik>.
- 7 James M. Edmonds, "Smelling Baraka: Everyday Islam and Islamic Normativity," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*. 36(3) (2019).

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