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'Don't be so serious': ethical play, Islam, and the transcendent

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Modes of play and playfulness are central to ethics, yet have not been as rigorously considered by anthropologists as have more earnest forms of ethical life. In this article, I argue that attention to play reframes recent anthropological debates about ethical transcendence and immanence. I do so through a consideration of the Islamic discourse of 'calculation' (*ḥisāb*), an idiom by which Muslims articulate their hoped-for state in the hereafter through the imagery of a divine accounting of good and bad deeds. Drawing on ethnography from the Indonesian province of Aceh, I show how *ḥisāb* cultivates forms of epistemological play through which Muslims explore the inscrutability of transcendence. Such play reveals the socially and theologically emergent qualities of transcendent truths and values, suggesting hidden affinities between transcendent stances and more immanent forms of ethical life.

One day at Majelis Taklim Ansharullah – an Islamic study circle for elderly men in the Indonesian regency of Nagan Raya, Aceh province – I found myself at the centre of a spirited conversation.[1] From 2008 until 2009, I attended Majelis Taklim Ansharullah's lessons, and on this occasion we were studying how the act of 'repentance' (I., *taubat*) affects one's lot in the afterlife.[2] As often was the case, my classmates asked an increasing number of questions as the lesson progressed. Our teacher, whom attendees addressed using the title Abon (a variation on an Arabic term for 'father'), dutifully responded to each. After one set of such exchanges, focused on how long a Muslim might wait to repent and still expect to accrue the blessings associated with this act, one of my classmates, Pak Panyang, looked at me and smiled.[3]

Pak Panyang fancied himself my spiritual mentor. Having become convinced that I would one day convert to Islam, he frequently reviewed our lessons with me, emphasizing what he thought would be most useful on my spiritual journey. On this occasion, he turned towards Abon and asked if it was indeed true that an 'infidel' (A., *oereuëng kaphé*) who recited the Islamic confession of faith, and thereby converted to Islam, would be released of responsibility for the sins that she or he had committed before converting. Abon paused. He looked briefly at me, perhaps sensing that this line of inquiry might move in a direction that he would prefer it not to. Nonetheless, he confirmed that it is indeed the case that upon conversion to Islam one's sins

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are forgiven. Hearing this response, Pak Panyang turned back to me. 'It is like this Daniel!' he exclaimed, 'You can do whatever you want before you convert! It will all be erased! (I., *Hapus semuanya!*)' Howls of laughter ensued, giving way to clucks of approval from several of our classmates. Bewildered looks, whether indicating confusion or disapproval I remain unsure, appeared on the faces of others. Then Pak Mudin, another classmate, piled on: 'Daniel! You should wait a while to convert. Until then you can drink, run around with women, do whatever you want! That is not true for us. Any sins we commit, we get punished for them!' These comments were followed by more laughter, and I found myself confused. My classmates were studying how to become better Muslims, and preparing themselves for their imminent deaths, yet they were encouraging me to delay the very act that they believed would ensure my happiness in the hereafter. I found myself pondering a question: were they serious?[4]

For me, recalling this vignette serves, among other things, as an ironic reminder that the anthropology of ethics has become serious business. I am not referring simply to the fact that the study of 'ethical life' has become a recognized sub-field of anthropology (Keane 2016; Laidlaw 2014; Robbins 2016; but see also critiques by Das 2016 and Lambek 2016). Rather, in our efforts to better understand the ethical, anthropologists have most often turned to the earnest, especially in situations of challenge or trial (although see Deeb & Harb 2013 and Hefner 2019). We study, for instance, modern Muslim women striving to enact ideals of modesty (Mahmood 2005), African-American mothers with chronically ill children assembling narrative selves (Mattingly 2014), and the construction of everyday social relations in the shadow of violence (Al-Mohammad & Peluso 2012; Das 2007). Indeed, even in describing comparatively mundane contexts, the anthropology of ethics has tended towards accounts of earnest striving (Agrama 2010; Hillewaert 2016; Scherz 2013).

None of this is surprising. Ethics, after all, is about shaping selves, acting justly, and pursuing the good, and these are projects that can seem most proper to the serious-minded. Nonetheless, Pak Panyang's assertion that I might do whatever I want before I convert suggests something different: namely a kind of playfulness that can also inflect ethical life. In this article, I flesh out the stakes of a more robust consideration of modes of ethical play by describing a form of such play common in Aceh. This allows for analytic reflection upon a key framing concept in recent debates in the anthropology of ethics: transcendence.

In the anthropology of ethics, the idea of transcendence has most frequently been used to describe codified ethical rules and principles, religion, the capacity to step outside of oneself in moments of reflexive thought and action, and other phenomena alleged to be detached from everyday thought, action, and experience (Laidlaw 2018: 182-7). Some have suggested that focusing on such transcendent forms runs the risk of obscuring the contingent and emergent character of ethical life (Das 2007; Lambek 2016). They would rather anthropologists turn to forms of ethics that are 'immanent' in social interaction and embodied forms of ethical judgement, rather than overtly tied to abstract systems of moral evaluation (Lambek 2010; 2015). In contrast, others have argued that ethical transcendence and immanence are entwined (Clarke 2014; Elliot 2016; Keane 2016; Lempert 2013; Mayne 2019; Scherz 2016). They suggest that without attention to how phenomena like religion, moral codes, and other systematic formulations of the good fold into everyday experience, our accounts of ethical life are incomplete.

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My analysis is consistent with these latter arguments recognizing the mutual imbrication of ethical immanence and transcendence; however, I offer it not to reiterate this point, but as a step towards a more rigorous theorization of the transcendent. Joel Robbins (2016) has argued that critics of ethical transcendence underestimate the degree to which even the most elevated and clearly articulated of transcendent values must be the product of phenomenologically immanent experiences (see also Kapferer 2016). In short, human engagements with transcendence arise from contexts that, while often marked as extraordinary, are the product of otherwise ordinary forms of experience. Following Victor Turner (1967), and ultimately Durkheim (1995 [1912]), Robbins points to ritual as a primary site where transcendent truths come to be known, valued, and embodied.

My argument runs parallel to that of Robbins; however, I approach play, rather than ritual, as the site where my Acehnese interlocutors experience and explore transcendent truths and values. Further, I emphasize not simply the social emergence of transcendence, but its theological emergence. While Durkheimian approaches might assume that, for believers, the contingent nature of transcendent truths remains below the threshold of consciousness, this is not necessarily the case. Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, emphasizes inscrutability as a key characteristic of transcendent truth. While an all-powerful monotheistic god lies at the centre of Islamic discourse and practice, knowledge of God's transcendence is theologically recognized as partial and emergent in human experience. Debates over the anthropomorphizing of God's characteristics, for example, centre on which elements of an enigmatic deity can be captured through comparison to human qualities (Holtzman 2011). Similarly, much Sufi practice depends upon God's unknowability except through mystical experience (Ahmed 2016). Even the Islamic legal tradition, at face value the most transparent of the Islamic sciences, is rooted in the assumption that anything besides an approximation of God's intentions lies beyond human capacities for knowledge (Hallaq 1997: 37-42, 207).

In this article, I argue that the play of my interlocutors, such as that described in the above vignette, engages with transcendent truths and values in a manner similar to how they are taken up in the aforementioned discourses, objectifying transcendence using conventional language to denote that which cannot be fully known or described (Keane 1997). Further, because transcendent truths and values are entwined with questions of fate and the afterlife, my interlocutors are keenly aware of how these truths and values emerge from life's contingent circumstances (see also Birchok 2019; Elliot 2016; Hamdy 2009; Menin 2015; Nevola 2018). Their play thus provides them with opportunities to explore the possibilities and limits of transcendence as it emerges socially and theologically. In so doing, it reveals affinities between transcendent stances and more obviously immanent forms of ethical life.

Subjunctive play, *ḥisāb*, and the transcendent

Anthropologists have taken up the idea of play and related concepts in a variety of ways. Clifford Geertz (1973), for example, famously posited that the 'deep play' of Balinese cockfights or American football games are contexts in which cultural values and social structures come into view. Anthropologists of humour, since at least A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1940), have analysed joking in a similar manner, frequently seeing it as a means of identifying, diffusing, or contesting tensions that arise within social hierarchies (see also Carty & Musharbash 2008; Seizer 2011). In the anthropology

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of Islam, much recent work has taken up 'leisure' and 'fun' in still another way, exploring how and to what extent we might interpret such activities as either resisting or recuperating Islamic norms or authority (Bayat 2007; Deeb & Harb 2013; Schielke 2010).

The kind of play that is the focal point of this article is best understood through a different tradition of analysis, namely one emphasizing play's 'subjunctive' qualities. Here the emphasis is upon the ability of play to create 'an "as if" or "could be"[...] universe', thereby providing a ground for positing and exploring possible social worlds (Seligman, Weller, Puett & Simon 2008: 7). In this, play shares much with ritual (Bateson 1972: 182; Huizinga 1949: 16-18; Seligman *et al.* 2008: 69-102; although see Gluckman & Gluckman 1977). As a subjunctive exercise, play, like ritual, allows its subjects to experiment with worlds that could be (Taneja 2018: 63-4). It also enables explorations of the most taken for granted or deeply held truths, probing their possibilities and limits. It can thus reveal the instability of such truths even as it affirms them.

One example of this is Tanya Luhrmann's description of 'serious play' among American evangelical Christians. Luhrmann (2012) argues that the evangelical subjects that she studied often affirm the existence of a 'hyperreal' God through engaging in a 'playful epistemology'. She describes her interlocutors as taking up this epistemology in order to inhabit both religious and sceptical secular subjectivities, often through imaginative exercises such as 'date nights' with God. Such an epistemology can be fun, but its most important characteristic is a double-register through which evangelicals negotiate the ambivalences that ensue when they move between religious and secular frames.

Luhrmann suggests that it is the experience of living in a post-secular society that makes such an epistemology possible; in contrast, I argue that the phenomenon that she describes is more generally characteristic of engagements with transcendence.[5] Irrespective of whether or not a secular frame is available to religious subjects, belief involves not assent but 'subjunctive commitment' to worlds posited and experienced through appeals to transcendent truths and values (Carlisle & Simon 2012: 222-3). As Luhrman's analysis suggests, play is a powerful medium for expressing such a commitment. Further, play often focuses on conventional idioms that, as Gregory Bateson illustrated for symbolic frames more generally (1972: 14-20, 177-93), lend themselves to new and paradoxical meanings, thereby reinforcing play's subjunctive potential.

In Aceh, a particularly prominent idiom of this kind is the category of *ḥisāb* (Ar.). Drawn from Qur'anic rhetoric, *ḥisāb* refers to the divine accounting of a person's good and bad deeds, often through the imagery of a heavenly account book or scroll used to record the merits and sins of each person (Gardet 2012). In different times and places, this idiom has taken more or less elaborate forms (Ibrahim 2018: 75-98; Mittermaier 2013). In Aceh, Islamic jurisprudential traditions have long emphasized the degrees of divine 'reward' (I., *pahala*) and 'torture' (I., *siksa*) associated with different acts, and over the past century and a half these traditions have been amplified as a result of three armed conflicts. During the Dutch-Aceh War (1873-c. 1914), for example, Acehnese guerrillas recited poetry emphasizing that a martyr's death dissolves the effects of one's sins (Alfian 1987; Kloos 2016: 284-90; Siegel 1979: 229-65). Related idioms continue to circulate today, being used to interpret the deaths that occurred during the December 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami (Samuels 2016: 41; Wieringa 2010: 321-2, 325).

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These may seem rather earnest circumstances from which to spring a mode of ethical play. It is important to keep in mind, however, that while the play of my Acehnese interlocutors frequently involves laughter, teasing, and light-heartedness, it is the subjunctive exploration of transcendent truth that is its primary characteristic. Indeed, I close this article by considering a rather sombre example. More important than a ludic tone is that the *ḥisāb* discourse, like the playful epistemology among evangelicals described by Luhrmann, is structured by double-registers that invite creative explorations of its possibilities and limits. *Ḥisāb* purports to describe that which is ultimately true yet unknowable, and explorations of such truth can appear counterintuitive or contradictory. Indeed, the imagery associated with *ḥisāb* is one motif through which Islamic scholars have argued over the meaning of conventional representations of God's transcendence, debating whether spiritual accounting registers exist in the world or are simply metaphors (Gardet 2012).

In addition, *ḥisāb* serves as a hinge between the immanent and the transcendent, tying human acts and agency to God's will and the hereafter. The explorations and ambiguities provoked by *ḥisāb* therefore frame the details of individual lives, as when Pak Panyang suggested that I might delay my conversion until after I had enjoyed the more dubious fruits of this world. Pak Panyang's suggestion points to another characteristic of the ethical play of my Acehnese interlocutors. Narrative forms of ethics, even when otherwise earnest, entail a subjunctive dimension, as narrating a self involves experimenting with possible pasts and futures (Johnson-Hanks 2002; Mattingly 2014; Samuels 2018; Zigon 2012). Because *ḥisāb* is entwined with questions of fate and the afterlife, the explorations of transcendence that it provokes involve ethical trajectories that entail divine reward and punishment. This can encourage strategic thinking about ethical possibilities, as suggested by Pak Panyang's proposition, which, from one standpoint, appears to be an invitation to game the system. Indeed, this kind of gaming vis-à-vis *ḥisāb* has been common enough that it has given rise to a genre of critique directed against such strategic considerations, usually framed in terms of sincerity (Ibrahim 2018: 93-6; Mittermaier 2013: 276). Nonetheless, it also entails the probing of ethical limits and possibilities, as well as the nature of transcendence itself.

In some ways, the kinds of ethical play *ḥisāb* cultivates resembles what Claire-Marie Hefner has termed 'moral *ludus*'. Hefner describes female Islamic boarding school students on Java who experiment with the limits of 'different social fields . . . or even opposed moral values' through fun and leisure (2019: 492; see also Deeb & Harb 2013). Similarly, Nur Amali Ibrahim illustrates how joking and light-heartedness help to produce 'improvisational' Islam among Indonesian university students striving to reconcile classical Islamic and liberal ways of being (2018: 99-103). Both of these examples share an emphasis on 'explorative' modes of ethical authority, whereby ethical subjects explore 'the varieties, possibilities, complexities, and contradictions of . . . [the] human condition' (Ahmed 2016: 282-5). This explorative mode also characterizes the ethical play of my interlocutors; however, it is not instigated through the inhabiting of different moral systems. Rather, it arises from the paradoxical formulations of transcendence that originate in Islamic discourse itself (Ahmed 2016: 278-81, 397-404).

Of course, subjunctive explorations of transcendence are not all that play accomplishes in Aceh. Pak Mudin, whose antics appear again in what follows, confided in me that he sometimes finds Abon's teachings unconvincing. We might, following literature analysing the ways humour can contest social hierarchy (Carty & Musharbash 2008; Radcliffe-Brown 1940; Seizer 2011), read him as challenging his teacher's

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authority. In addition, joking and jovial teasing, especially among cohorts of young men, is valued in Aceh as conducive to warm sociality and mental health. Ever since my earliest fieldwork, I have been regularly reminded by Acehnese friends, 'Don't be so serious!' (A., *Bè' serious that!*). None of this, however, is inconsistent with play's role in constituting and exploring transcendent truths and values. Indeed, one of play's key characteristics is its tendency to incorporate multiple subjunctive frames simultaneously (Bateson 1972: 177-93).

'What if someone waits until halfway through their last breath?'

To more carefully consider the ways my Acehnese interlocutors explore the inscrutability of transcendence through ethical play, let us return to Majelis Taklim Ansharullah, the study circle from which I draw the vignette with which I introduce this article. Majelis Taklim Ansharullah was a weekly gathering of a form known as *majelis taklim* (I., assembly for learning), a term that in Indonesia denotes a range of educational and devotional practices for religious non-specialists (Gade 2004: 33-7; Millie 2008; Winn 2012). In Nagan Raya, these most frequently consist of lessons in which a religious teacher, usually the head of an Islamic boarding school, instructs adult villagers in one or more subjects.

During the year that I attended Majelis Taklim Ansharullah, all of the group's members were men. Nearly all were over the age of 60. The group focused its studies on eschatological themes, reading about the ordeals of the grave and the afterlife. This was knowledge that participants believed would counterbalance their sins and guide them through the ordeals of the hereafter.[6] We considered, among other things, the size and weight of the mallets used by the angels Munkar and Nakir to punish the bodies of dead sinners, contemplated the razor-thin bridge Muslims will cross on the day of reckoning, and discussed at length the mysterious instruction that on the day of judgement one should always remember to 'turn to the right' (A., *wét oeneun*).

The eschatological literature read by my interlocutors at Majelis Taklim Ansharullah paints a vivid picture of events that are beyond human understanding. Nonetheless, studying these materials is meant to mould human character and behaviour. The explanatory text associated with descriptions of the end times in these works reminds readers that they must get their lives in order if they want to avoid the tortures of the grave and the day of judgement. Contemplating these ordeals emphasizes the reality of divine accounting, even as it reaffirms the inscrutable nature of transcendence. As our teacher regularly reminded us, God's agency lies behind every event, and even apparently natural or human causes are not fully comprehensible through human faculties.

Majelis taklim are, therefore, pursuits of knowledge of transcendent ethical truth in one of its most elaborate, but generally accessible, forms. Given that Majelis Taklim Ansharullah's members attend these lessons as a way to prepare for their own deaths, one might expect their tone to be sombre; instead, they often could best be described as raucous. The sort of puckish questions and off-colour teasing that arose in the afore-described discussion of repentance were typical. Indeed, on the dullest of days, our conversations drew howls of laughter, ribbing, and other forms of light-hearted banter.

A characteristic example occurred during my first experience at Majelis Taklim Ansharullah. We were discussing the topic of 'remembrance' (I., *zikir*), and Abon had spent much of the conversation reminding us that in order to guarantee that we die cognizant of God's unity, we should regularly recite litanies (A., *ratéb*), especially the

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Arabic phrase 'there is no god but God' (*lā ilāha illā llāh*). This would prevent us from inadvertently falling into a state of incomplete belief in God's monotheism (I., *syirik*), as well as clean our hearts of sins. Abon suggested that to ensure that we recite the appropriate number of daily recitations, we should aim for a high total. Ultimately, it would be best to train oneself to be constantly reciting such phrases. But if unsure of our ability to do so, we should set an ambitious daily goal. 'For example, 500', Abon recommended.

Suddenly Pak Mudin raised his hand. 'What if I die in the bathroom?' he asked. The open-air pavilion in which we were holding our lesson filled with giggles. Pak Mudin smiled in acknowledgement of this reaction, but awaited an answer. Abon, straight-faced, responded by noting that this was not a problem. 'God can be remembered in the bathroom', he said. Pak Mudin drew his face back and peered at Abon out of one eye. 'Really?' he asked incredulously. At this point, Abon could not keep from chuckling. Gathering himself, he said, 'Really. One can recite "Allah, Allah, Allah"'. The image of Abon reciting God's name while in the bathroom was a bit much for several of my classmates, who broke into laughter. Then someone raised the point of whether or not reciting God's name in the bathroom was an act of defilement, comparing it to bringing a Qur'an into a space where people relieve themselves. Such cases had been discussed prominently in recent Acehnese news media, as religious teachers had been debating the appropriateness of bringing cellular phones with Qur'anic texts saved to them into bathrooms. Abon, who had again begun chuckling, let this conversation continue for a few more minutes. He then gently shut it down: 'Enough! You do not need to worry about this'.

My classmates frequently offered such questions. Some, like Pak Mudin's, bordered on the irreverent. They tended to arise in response to the vivid eschatological imagery found on the pages of our texts, and regularly conjoined earnestness with a mischievous tone that at times nodded to the absurd. One of my classmates, for example, once asked if the angels Munkar and Nakir, who are thought to come to test the dead in the grave before administering painful punishments in recompense for earthly sins, could be bribed. Another once raised his hand to ask, 'How deep is hell?'

It is telling that my classmates' questions frequently revolved around such matters. Topics like the depths of hell or the details of interactions with angels are areas of knowledge to which one might apply the phrase 'without asking how' (Ar., *bi lā kaifa*). This phrase is used within erudite Islamic theological traditions, especially the influential Ashʿarī school, to defer the meaning of anthropomorphic descriptions of God (Holtzman 2011). These traditions acknowledge that such descriptions are true if found in the Qur'an or another authoritative source; but precisely how they are true is left open-ended, accepted as unresolvable through human cognition. Nonetheless, they serve as an invitation to contemplate such contradictions, an exercise requiring an epistemology capable of experimenting with incomplete and contingent formulations of truth and value. The conjoining of earnestness and play with which my classmates engaged the aforementioned eschatological imagery reflected such an epistemology, taking up double-registers similar to those that structure the playful epistemology of the American evangelicals described by Tanya Luhrmann.

Often the questions raised by participants at Majelis Taklim Ansharullah were stereotypically scholastic, entailing contemplation of theological niceties with little consequence for practical action. Indeed, Abon himself regularly pointed this out. 'Hell is deep', he once insisted with a chuckle, 'that is all we need to know'. However,

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when these questions turned to topics with more immediately apparent consequences, a playful register could be used to frame theological and ethical problems with much higher stakes.

Consider the conversation with which I introduce this article, namely the one in which Pak Panyang suggested that I might delay my conversion in order to enjoy a life of wine, women, and song. It had begun with Abon explaining the importance of repentance for committed Muslims. He noted that the repentance of a Muslim is a pious act (I., *amalan*). As such, it counterbalances one's sins, while simultaneously strengthening one's commitment to a monotheistic and omnipotent God. This, ideally, leads to divine reward and serves as the foundation of future pious acts.

After expounding on these points, Abon paused. Pak Mudin, taking advantage of the moment, sat up. Clutching his chest and neck while letting out a belaboured breath, he wobbled at his torso as if he was about to collapse. He then turned to Abon, his hands still on his chest, and asked, 'What if someone repents, but waits until halfway through their last breath [to do so]?' Those assembled in the room waited in pregnant silence, but Abon offered no reply. Taking this as affirmation that such an act would be effective, Pak Mudin offered a follow-up question: 'How about half way between the half breath and death?' At this Abon could not help but respond. He smiled wryly, before advising, 'Don't let it happen like that' (A., *Bè' djadèh lagèë njan*).[7] The room filled with muted laughter.

This exchange, which led to the one exploring whether I should delay my conversion, is exemplary of several characteristics of the ethical register in which Majelis Taklim Ansharullah is often carried out. The theatrics with which Pak Mudin asked his question, together with Abon's measured response and our classmates' charged silence in awaiting an answer, made clear the nature of the inquiry. It was playful, but earnest. Further, Abon never actually answered the question. His response was in the mode of advice giving, refusing a general answer in favour of personalized guidance along a path of moral development (Agrama 2010). This mirrored the way he treated more obscure questions, such as those about the depths of hell or passing from this world while in the bathroom, which he also tended to leave open-ended, suggesting their ultimate inscrutability. Yet it involved a slightly different stance vis-à-vis transcendence. Rather than playful exploration, which Abon tolerated and in which he at times participated, he here chose to emphasize avoiding behaviours that might risk the development of a less than ideal ethical disposition.

Abon's silence on an issue that otherwise might seem central to Pak Mudin's inquiry – that of sincerity – is especially interesting. One response to Pak Mudin's question, drawn from established traditions of Islamic ethics, would be to probe the sincerity of such an act. That this was a subtext of Pak Mudin's question became apparent in how it prodded Pak Panyang to suggest that in order to enjoy the fruits of this world I might delay my conversion, an act that he took as parallel to repentance. Indeed, once such a calculative logic became explicit, Abon did turn to questions of sincerity, arguing that a delayed conversion could not be sincere and therefore would not have the desired effects.

Nonetheless, sincerity has an ambivalent relationship to *ḥisāb* as a field of discourse. While highly valued and considered a requirement for forming the proper intention for carrying out an effective ritual or ethical act, sincerity does not necessarily have to be a quality of the individual whom it will benefit. In Aceh, this is most evident in the practice of praying for the souls of the deceased, which is widely understood to lessen

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the divine punishments that would otherwise be suffered by the dead in recompense for their earthly sins (Bowen 1993: 259-68; Snouck Hurgronje 1906: 427-30). Here, one's accounting ledger is, in essence, cleared by other people, who ameliorate the effects of one's sins through good deeds after it is too late for the deceased to do so for her- or himself.

Praying for the souls of the deceased in this manner is a contested practice, in large part because it raises issues of sincerity, agency, and moral responsibility (Bowen 1993: 251-72). It nicely illustrates the propensity for *ḥisāb* to lend itself to what, from some vantage points, looks simply like strategic gaming. The colonial-era ethnographer-cum-intelligence agent Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, echoing the sentiment of the local Acehnese Islamic reformists with whom he worked, disdainfully described the practice of paying others to recite extra prayers on behalf of deceased loved ones who had skipped their ritual obligations during their lives (1906: 435-8). Nonetheless, praying for the deceased remains common in Aceh today, despite over a century of such critiques. Large numbers of Acehnese not only find it acceptable, but also see it as an obligation.

Indeed, sincerity can itself be taken as indeterminable. This is because it fundamentally intersects with God's agency, and therefore is tied up with the inscrutability of transcendence. Conversations I commonly hear in Aceh about the Prophet Muhammad's uncle and protector Abu Talib help to make this point.

Muslims have long argued about the fate of Abu Talib, who never definitively converted to Islam, but about whom stories of deathbed conversions and divine interventions abound (Donner 1987). One day, shortly after Ramadan in 2009, I was visiting a friend's family in a nearby village. My friend's father, who taught at an Islamic boarding school, told this version of the end of Abu Talib's life:

> There is a story from the Prophet's life and deeds (I., *hadis*). The Prophet, may peace be upon him, was crying continuously because his beloved Abu Talib would not get into heaven [because he had not become a Muslim]. So God told him, 'Do not worry! I will take care of this problem with Abu Talib'.

Intrigued, I asked: 'So God will take Abu Talib to heaven even though he was not a Muslim?' 'Oh, it is not like that', my friend's father replied. 'Abu Talib recited the profession of faith just before he died. Even a thief who does this will go to heaven'. Struggling to understand, I responded: 'But from the story, it seems like God caused this to happen'. 'No, no. He [i.e. Abu Talib] did it of his own intention', came the reply.

The confusion I was experiencing was the result of a fundamental tension in Islamic thinking regarding human free will and transcendent agency. Indeed, given the centrality of both predestination and moral responsibility in Islamic thought (De Cillis 2014), combined with the myriad ways that the tension between the two have articulated in different contexts (Birchok 2019; Elliot 2016; Hamdy 2009; Menin 2015; Nevola 2018), there was an element of my question that missed the point. The conundrum of Abu Talib's fate cannot be solved, precisely because the intersection of human agency and God's will is one of the elements of transcendent truth that is most inscrutable to human cognition. Humans must strive as moral agents, even though ultimately God is responsible for all that occurs in the world. This tension is one place where epistemological double-registers develop, resulting in not only ethical play but also often playful treatments of earnest life pursuits, for example the seeking of one's predestined marriage partner (Elliot 2016).

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These double-registers were made apparent at Majelis Taklim Ansharullah through exchanges such as the ones contemplating the effects of delaying conversion or repentance. They were recognizable in part by the tense in which they were carried out. In these moments, my classmates typically took a future perfect stance that effectively entwined the inscrutability of the transcendent with the uncertainty of the future (Nevola 2018).[8] They experimented with scenarios that involved thinking through what life would be like once something (i.e. repentance, conversion) *would have* happened. Stories of Abu Talib's fate operated similarly, albeit through a backward glance at a moment in which such speculation was still possible: 'The Prophet, may peace be upon him, was crying continuously because his beloved Abu Talib would not get into heaven'.

Ḥisāb lends itself to this kind of speculation. Thinking through one's possible actions to determine how best to even out one's divine accounts requires one to imagine a world not yet in existence, but that might someday be. This world is one that could be brought about by earnest striving, calculative gaming, or some combination of the two. Regardless, imagining it requires experimenting with possible futures framed by truths and values valorized as transcendent, but never fully knowable. It therefore entails a kind of ethical play that, through the building of narrative selves, paradoxically asserts both human agency and the limitation of that agency in the transcendence of God.

'Zaini was lucky . . . He will suffer but a little'

Not every example of ethical play is so obviously playful. Indeed, in some instances it can be rather sombre. This was illustrated by the aftermath of a tragic event that I observed in 2009. This example is particularly helpful for considering the degree to which transcendence is socially and theologically emergent, as well as how that emergence manifests through ethical play framed by the *ḥisāb* discourse.

Approaching the end of a year and a half of fieldwork, I was sitting one evening in a coffee shop in Kota Baru, the Acehnese village in Nagan Raya in which I was living. Suddenly the air was filled with alarm as older boys and young men, most between the ages of 15 and 25, jumped onto their motorbikes, animatedly exchanging information. One of my tablemates, sensing my confusion, turned and broke the news: 'It is Zaini. He went to Kubang Gajah Beach with two friends. The sea pulled them out. The others made it back, but Zaini is still missing'.

We talked a bit longer. I asked if there was still hope that Zaini, a young man from a neighbouring village, might be alive. Raja, who was about to go and join a search party, responded by noting that Zaini was not a good swimmer. He described how he and others were going to take fishing boats out off the coast looking for their friend, plying the dark night waters. He was stoic as he explained this, and I sensed that he anticipated recovering remains. Sure enough, after searching through the night, one of these parties came across Zaini's body. They brought it back to the village early the next morning. It was taken to his family's house, washed, and wrapped in cloth before being put into a perfumed coffin. This coffin was then in turn wrapped in batik cloth and laid on several pillows. About half the men in attendance lined up in rows, women behind them, to perform the funeral prayers (I., *salat jenazah*). This was followed by a homily, which preceded the burial.

The man who delivered this homily was identified by those next to me as a *teungku* (A.): that is, a religious teacher or functionary. He had led the prayers and now addressed those assembled:

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> We all knew Zaini. He was a child of our village. Just two years ago he graduated from high school. Some might say we should be sad. But think about this. In Islam, one's actions only begin to be counted from the time one is 16. 16! Zaini was just two years out of high school! So he was 18, 19? If he had lived until old age, like the rest of us, think about his tortures in the grave. He did not live long enough to be tempted. His sins were few. Much fewer than those of us who have lived longer than him. Zaini was lucky. We will be tortured in the grave. But Zaini? No! He will suffer but a little.

I remember being struck by this framing of Zaini's life. The religious teacher invoked the *ḥisāb* frame to make sense of it, in particular its youthful end, noting that human acts only begin to be counted at the age of 16.[9] This, however, was not the usual way in which religious teachers spoke of young people. Rather, it is more common for Acehnese to assume that the young are plagued by temptation and sin. This is in large part because youth are understood to have worldly responsibilities that put them in situations in which temptation is ever present: encounters with members of the opposite sex, markets, universities, and distant lands far from the strictures of kinship and village (Birchok 2018). Thus, young people are frequently thought to be particularly vulnerable to the tortures of the grave, given the risk that they, believing that their hour of death is still in the distant future, might die unrepentant in the midst of a life of sin. In contrast, older people are frequently understood to have grown more patient and less impulsive, and to have more limited worldly responsibilities. This minimizes their temptations and gives them more time to repent for the misdeeds of their youth (Kloos 2017: 123-9).

How, then, might we understand the invocation of *ḥisāb* by the *teungku* at Zaini's funeral, who counted the young man as lucky on account of his youthful death? Finding a starting point for addressing this question involves returning to how tense structures the ways in which *ḥisāb* frames ethical play. Under normal circumstances, *ḥisāb* is invoked as a tool of ethical cultivation, one oriented towards a subjunctive future perfect. It participates in long-standing Islamic practices through which reflecting upon one's moment of death and the punishments of the hereafter prompts repentance and renewal (Hirschkind 2006: 190-221; Mahmood 2005: 140-5). Thus, it is oriented towards a future, and as yet undetermined, life; however, with his backward glance at Zaini's now completed life, the homilist acknowledged that the teenager's ethical project of self-cultivation had ceased. Rather than a future-oriented account of possibility, *ḥisāb* now framed a retrospective narrative of a closed fate, transforming the ethical registers through which this life could be narrated (Nevola 2018; see also Lambek 2010: 50-4). If just twenty-four hours before his homily this very same *teungku* might have been exhorting Zaini to repent of the sins that he was accumulating as a young man, he now identified his youthful death as shielding him from the divine punishments that were coming to the rest of us unlucky folks.

It is possible that Zaini had been a pious young man, and that this was the reason the homilist emphasized the state of his account vis-à-vis those who survived him.[10] But note that the homilist said nothing about the details of Zaini's life aside from his age at death and education level, explicitly linking the teenager's low sin count to his age. Indeed, even if Zaini had been a particularly good person, it is unlikely that, during his life, a religious teacher would have taken up *ḥisāb* to articulate this. As a discourse of edification, *ḥisāb* is meant to serve as a reminder of the punishments that might await one after death, an exercise thought to be of benefit to everyone, even the pious. Rather, it appears that the homilist was attempting to console those assembled. Indeed, such an act is widely understood in Aceh as having the purpose of preventing mourners, who might otherwise be thrown into despair, from calling into

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question God's justice and omnipotence (Siegel 2000: 105-7). Further, this also allowed the homilist to remind those assembled of what waited for them after their deaths. This doubled back to *ḥisāb*'s role of ethical edification, but with the assembled mourners, rather than Zaini, as its target. The homilist accomplished all of this through familiar language and idioms associated with *ḥisāb*, but articulated in a manner that produced otherwise counterintuitive meanings (Bateson 1972: 14-20, 177-93).

This was possible because of a series of intersecting, but not necessarily coterminous, double-registers that accrue to the *ḥisāb* discourse: *ḥisāb* as an ethic of consolation is in tension with its resonances as a tool of self-cultivation; *ḥisāb* as a frame for looking towards a yet unrealized future is in tension with it as a frame for making sense of a life already lived; and *ḥisāb* as an idiom promising to make apparent the state of one's life vis-à-vis the hereafter is in tension with the fact that the balance of one's account is always, by definition, unknowable (Mittermaier 2013: 287-8). None of these are the tensions of belief and radical doubt that underpin the playful epistemology of the American evangelicals described by Tanya Luhrmann; but they nonetheless point to the mysterious doings of an inscrutable transcendent god. Further, they lend themselves to an ethical play that, whether in the solemnity of a funeral or the puckish banter of a study circle, constitutes subjunctive moments in which both the theological and social qualities of transcendence's inscrutability co-emerge.

What is transcendence anyway?

If conversion evens out one's spiritual account, why not put off this act for a time in order to enjoy the more dubious fruits of this world? How deep is hell? And if one should remember God at the moment of one's death, but doing so in the bathroom suggests defilement, what if one kicks the bucket while on the can? For my Acehnese interlocutors, such questions spark a range of responses: laughter, curiosity, teasing, and incredulousness, to name just a few. These responses are frequently playful, but this does not mean that my interlocutors approach the questions that provoke them flippantly. Most of them follow Abon's fatherly advice: 'Don't let it happen like that!' Nonetheless, they also look for opportunities to even the balance of their moral accounts through pious acts like reciting the Qur'an or giving alms. Others hope that their children will hold feasts to pray for their souls. When I ask about whether such expectations raise troubling questions about sincerity, agency, and God's justice, they commonly respond with the Arabic refrain *wallahu a'lam* (God knows best), indexing the ultimate inscrutability of the transcendent.

In recent debates in the anthropology of ethics, transcendence has stood in for certainty, codified and clear ethical rules or principles, and the human capacity to reflexively step outside of oneself. These can be useful ways to think about transcendence; however, they de-emphasize its socially emergent qualities (Kapferer 2016; Robbins 2016). When understood in these terms, engagements with transcendence tend to be indexed by reverent, earnest, and consistent reasoning or behaviour. The sorts of teasing and off-colour questions that arise during Majelis Taklim Ansharullah are therefore hard to read as engagements with transcendence, and even the taking up of *ḥisāb* by the aforementioned homilist is more likely to be understood simply as an act of consolation than as an effort to elucidate ultimate truths. Nonetheless, such examples represent instances in which Muslims engage in subjunctive explorations of transcendence, the qualities of which are knowable only in

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contingent, partial, and emergent fashions (Ahmed 2016; Carlisle & Simon 2012: 222-3; Seligman *et al.* 2008).

One of the reasons such subjunctive explorations of transcendence have been overlooked in the anthropological literature may be a tendency for some critics to assume that ethical transcendence is not only earnest, but also destructive. Some, for example, have drawn attention to the propensity of transcendent traditions to promote 'war against the ostensibly and the actually irreligious … [so they might] transcend base instincts or primitive thinking and rise to the transcendent heights of ethical life' (Lambek 2016: 784). Setting aside the question of why such a missionizing ethos would not be a valid field for the social scientific study of ethics (Laidlaw 2018: 184-5), this article reveals that multiple forms of engagement with the transcendent can, and often do, coexist.

Recent state-sponsored legal reforms in Aceh, for example, are framed in terms of cultivating a more thoroughly Islamic society based on adherence to 'Islamic law as a complete and total system' (I., *syari'at Islam secara kaffah*) (Feener 2014). These reforms frequently have elided the contingent legal, institutional, and theological histories that underpin them, and some Acehnese have criticized them for reflecting an overly rigid interpretation of the Islamic legal tradition (Afrianty 2016; Idria 2016; Otto & Otto 2016). Further, they sometimes involve violent forms of ethical 'socialization' (I., *sosialisasi*) (Feener 2014: 108-11, 202-5, 240-3; Kloos 2017: 132-7). They might, thus, be taken as an example of the aforementioned propensity for transcendent traditions to promote 'war against the ostensibly and the actually irreligious'. Nonetheless, explorative engagements with transcendent truth through the kinds of play described in this article have continued alongside the legal reform project. This should remind us to attend to the particular ethnographic contexts through which people engage with transcendent truths and values, rather than assume the character of transcendent ethical stances a priori.

Anthropological scepticism towards transcendent ethics, whether as a focal point of research or as a prescriptive project in itself, is understandable. Our commitment as anthropologists to the phenomenological lived experiences of those whom we study, and the primacy of this experience over 'third-person' accounts, has long been one of our discipline's answers to Archimedes' point (Jackson 2005: xxviii-xxx, 35-8; Mattingly 2014: 12-14; although see Geertz 1974); however, this has never meant that we jettison third-person abstractions. Indeed, among the most important reasons we have not done so is because we know how powerfully such abstractions fold into and emerge out of the immanence of first-person experiences (Das 2007: 15-16, 79-94).[11]

Ḥisāb is just such a third-person account, one tied up in Islamic notions of the transcendent. It deserves our attention, first and foremost, because it inflects the everyday ethical experiences of Muslims such as my Acehnese interlocutors. But it offers an additional point of interest, namely as an opportunity to reflect upon assumptions embedded in anthropological approaches to transcendence and the ethical. Rather than reifying transcendence as codified and clear, *ḥisāb* reveals the emergence of transcendent truths and values as contingent, partial, and, indeed, immanent in both human experience and theology. In their playful questions about how transcendence's qualities manifest in the world, their taking up of *ḥisāb*'s affordance to game the system, and their shifting glances backward and forward in ethical time, my Acehnese interlocutors explore transcendence, subtly recognizing its emergence in their lived experiences. The double-registers that their ethical play produces allows them to affirm

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a commitment to transcendent truths and values, while not requiring them to take distinctions between transcendence and immanence so seriously that these become overdetermining. In so doing, they invite anthropologists to do the same.

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NOTES

[1] Aceh is a predominantly rural and overwhelmingly Muslim province at the westernmost tip of the archipelagic Indonesian nation. Nagan Raya is located on Aceh's relatively remote west coast. I have been carrying out fieldwork there since 2006, including for over a year in 2008-9, and roughly a month each in 2006 and 2015.

[2] I distinguish Indonesian and Acehnese terms, both of which most Acehnese use fluently, by marking them with 'I.' or 'A.'. I mark most Islamic terms of Arabic derivation as Indonesian, and use their standard Indonesian orthographies. When I identify an Arabic term as such, I use 'Ar.'.

[3] All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

[4] All ethnographic vignettes are reconstructed from field notes.

[5] For parallel scepticism regarding the post-secular nature of this epistemology, see Engelke (2012), Laidlaw (2012), Lester (2012), and Meyer (2012).

[6] For examples of similar lessons from nearby Java, see Dhofier (1999: 261, 272), Geertz (1960: 182-4), Howell (2001: 715-18), Peacock (1978: 84-5), and van Bruinessen (1990: 236-9).

[7] A more standard translation of this phrase might be 'Don't be like that!' I have not translated it as such because Abon's usage, which he deployed recurrently, was directed at discouraging questioners from pursuing a course of action suggested by a question, rather than scolding them for asking the question.

[8] Indonesian languages do not morphologically mark for tense, so my invocation of the future perfect is meant to characterize the ways in which my interlocutors talk about the future, rather than indicate a grammatical shift in a technical sense.

[9] See Siegel (2000: 105-7) for a parallel example, one involving an Acehnese toddler who died of illness in the early 1960s, suggesting that the expression of such sentiments has long been a conventional way available to Acehnese for mourning those who die young.

[10] I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to think through this possibility.

[11] Das's work is most often aligned with approaches to ethical immanence. Nonetheless, I find her arguments most compelling when she emphasizes the 'mutual absorption' of the natural and the social, whereby third-person abstractions such as kinship intermingle with the emergent qualities of lived social experience.

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« Ne soyez pas si sérieux » : le jeu éthique, l'Islam et le transcendant

Résumé

Le jeu et le ludique occupent une place centrale dans l'éthique, mais les anthropologues ne les ont pas étudiés aussi rigoureusement que les formes plus sérieuses de vie éthique. L'attention portée au jeu recadre les récents débats anthropologiques sur la transcendance et l'immanence éthiques. L'article contribue à ces débats à partir d'un examen du discours islamique de « calcul » (*ḥisāb*) par lequel les musulmans expriment leur état espéré dans l'au-delà à travers l'imagerie d'une comptabilité divine des bonnes et des mauvaises actions. En s'appuyant sur l'ethnographie de la province indonésienne d'Aceh, l'auteur montre comment le *ḥisāb* cultive des formes de jeu épistémologique par le biais duquel les musulmans explorent l'impénétrabilité de la transcendance. Un tel jeu révèle les qualités socialement et théologiquement émergentes des valeurs et des vérités transcendantes, suggérant ainsi des affinités cachées entre des positions transcendantes et des formes plus immanentes de vie éthique.

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