

The Living Scripture In The Archipelago: Tafsir Traditions and Quranic Interpretation in the Indonesian Muslim Scholarly Discourse

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Abstract: Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, has cultivated a rich and distinctive tradition of Quranic interpretation that reflects both its unique socio-cultural landscape and its sustained engagement with broader currents of Islamic intellectual history. This study examines the trajectory of tafsir scholarship in Indonesia, tracing how indigenous exegetical practices developed from early Nusantara manuscripts through the colonial and national independence periods to the complex hermeneutical debates of the present era. Grounded in the history of Islamic thought and the sociology of religious knowledge, this research employs a qualitative-descriptive approach drawing on primary tafsir texts and an extensive body of secondary scholarly literature. The analysis identifies three defining characteristics of Indonesian tafsir, namely its persistent engagement with local cultural and linguistic contexts; a methodological shift from classical-textual toward thematic and socially oriented interpretations; and the growing appropriation of modern hermeneutics among Indonesian Muslim scholars. These developments illuminate how the Quranic text functions as a living, contextually responsive tradition in one of the world's most pluralistic Muslim societies, and they offer significant implications for advancing Islamic hermeneutical scholarship beyond the Arab-centric paradigm.

Keywords: tafsir, Quranic interpretation, Indonesia, hermeneutics.

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Introduction

The Quran occupies a position of unparalleled centrality in the intellectual and spiritual life of Indonesian Muslims, who constitute the largest single Muslim community in the world, numbering well in excess of two hundred million individuals. Yet the manner in which this foundational scripture has been read, interpreted, and applied across the Indonesian archipelago reflects a process of cultural negotiation far more intricate than any simple reception of Middle Eastern religious thought. The tradition of tafsir, or systematic Quranic exegesis, in Indonesia has evolved over several centuries, shaped by the interplay of classical Islamic scholarship, local cultural traditions, colonial disruptions, and the manifold pressures of modernity and globalization.

Scholarly attention to Indonesian tafsir has grown considerably since the foundational contributions of Howard Federspiel and Peter Riddell, who were among the first Western academics to document the breadth and sophistication of Quranic interpretive literature produced in the Malay-Indonesian world.¹ Federspiel's survey of popular Indonesian Quranic literature opened important questions about the relationship between learned exegesis and popular religiosity, while Riddell's philological and historical studies illuminated the earliest strata of exegetical activity in the archipelago.² Subsequent scholarship by Islah Gusmian, Sahiron Syamsuddin, and Abdul Mustaqim has further refined the field, offering detailed periodizations, methodological taxonomies, and epistemological analyses of how Indonesian scholars have approached the sacred text across different historical moments.³

Despite this growing body of scholarship, several questions remain inadequately addressed in the existing literature. The first concerns how the methodological frameworks employed by Indonesian tafsir scholars relate to and diverge from the classical Sunni exegetical tradition. The second concerns the ways in which the socio-political context of Indonesia has shaped the hermeneutical choices made by Muslim exegetes at different historical junctures. This study seeks to address both questions by tracing the historical development of tafsir in Indonesia, analyzing its methodological characteristics, and evaluating the significance of contemporary hermeneutical innovations for the future of Islamic scholarship in the country.

The discussion proceeds in three main parts. The first addresses the historical roots of tafsir in the Nusantara tradition, covering the period from the

¹ Howard M. Federspiel, *Popular Indonesian Literature of the Qur'an* (Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1994); Peter G. Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses* (London: Hurst, 2001).

² Federspiel, *Popular Indonesian Literature*, 8-12; Peter G. Riddell, "Earliest Quranic Exegetical Activity in the Malay-Speaking States," *Archipel* 38 (1989): 107-108, <https://doi.org/10.3406/arch.1989.2562>.

³ Islah Gusmian, *Khazanah Tafsir Indonesia: dari Hermeneutika hingga Ideologi* (Jakarta: Teraju, 2003), 33-50; Abdul Mustaqim, *Epistemologi Tafsir Kontemporer* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2010), 12-30; Sahiron Syamsuddin, *Hermeneutika dan Pengembangan Ulumul Qur'an* (Yogyakarta: Nawesea Press, 2009), 1-15.

seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth century. The second examines the methodological diversity that characterizes Indonesian Quranic interpretation, with particular attention to the epistemological transformations of the late twentieth century. The third considers contemporary developments, including gender-sensitive readings, the challenge of literalist movements, the impact of digital media, and the emergence of ecological hermeneutics. The article closes with concluding remarks that synthesize the key findings and suggest directions for future research.

The Historical Roots of Tafsir in the Nusantara Tradition

The earliest evidence of systematic Quranic exegetical activity in the Malay-Indonesian world dates to the seventeenth century, a period during which Islamic scholarship in the archipelago was reaching new levels of sophistication through sustained contact with scholars in Mecca, Medina, and the broader Arab-Islamic world. The figure of 'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Singkili (c. 1615-1693), an Acehnese scholar who spent nearly two decades studying in the Haramayn, stands as a pivotal reference point in this history.⁴ His exegetical work, *Tarjuman al-Mustafid*, is widely regarded as the earliest complete tafsir in the Malay language, and its composition marked a watershed moment in the indigenization of Islamic learning in Southeast Asia.⁵

Tarjuman al-Mustafid was substantially an adaptation of the classical Arabic commentary known as *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, the joint work of Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti; but al-Singkili's contribution lay precisely in his ability to render this material accessible to a Malay-speaking readership while making selective additions and modifications that reflected his own scholarly priorities.⁶ This act of translation and contextual adaptation established a pattern that would characterize much of Indonesian tafsir production in subsequent centuries, namely the creative mediation between the classical Arab-Islamic scholarly heritage and the local intellectual and linguistic environment.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Quranic interpretation in the archipelago continued largely through informal channels of pesantren education, where students engaged with classical Arabic tafsir texts under the guidance of senior teachers or *kiai*.⁷ The pesantren functioned as the primary institutional site for the transmission and reproduction of Islamic knowledge, and its pedagogy, centered on the direct reading and oral commentary of classical texts, ensured a degree of continuity with the broader

⁴ Riddell, "Earliest Quranic Exegetical Activity," 107.

⁵ Anthony H. Johns, "Qur'anic Exegesis in the Malay World: In Search of a Profile," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 260.

⁶ Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World*, 147-152.

⁷ Martin van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren dan Tarekat: Tradisi-tradisi Islam di Indonesia* (Bandung: Mizan, 1995), 37-45.

Sunni scholarly tradition even in the absence of formal madrasah institutions on the Arab model.

The colonial period brought significant disruptions to this tradition, even as it simultaneously created new conditions for the production of tafsir literature in vernacular Indonesian and regional languages. The proliferation of printing technology from the mid-nineteenth century onward enabled a wider circulation of Islamic texts, including translations of and commentaries on the Quran, far beyond the confines of the pesantren environment.⁸ Literate Muslims in urban centers gained access to religious literature through the expanding print market, transforming the relationship between text and community in ways that Islamic scholars were only beginning to fully reckon with.

By the early twentieth century, a new generation of Muslim reformers, influenced by the modernist thought of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida as disseminated through the journal *al-Manar*, began to produce Quranic commentaries that emphasized rational engagement with the text, attention to its social and ethical dimensions, and a critical stance toward accumulated traditions of classical commentary.⁹ This reformist current found institutional expression in organizations such as Muhammadiyah, founded in 1912, whose publications and educational activities promoted a vision of Islam grounded in direct engagement with the Quran and Sunna rather than reliance on the accumulated authority of the scholastic tradition.

The emergence of these reformist currents did not, however, displace the traditional pesantren-based approach to Quranic interpretation; rather, the two orientations coexisted in creative tension, each shaping the other in ways that produced a distinctively Indonesian hermeneutical sensibility. This sensibility, characterized by an openness to contextual adaptation alongside a deep respect for classical learning, would prove decisive in the subsequent development of tafsir scholarship in the independence era.

Methodological Approaches in Indonesian Tafsir Scholarship

The methodological landscape of Indonesian tafsir is characterized by considerable diversity, reflecting both the plurality of Islamic intellectual traditions that have shaped the archipelago and the varied purposes for which Quranic interpretation has been undertaken across different institutional and social contexts. Islah Gusmian, in his landmark study of twentieth-century Indonesian tafsir, identifies several key methodological categories that have structured this diversity, including the *tahlili* (analytical), *ijmali* (global), *muqaran* (comparative), and *mawdu'i* (thematic) approaches, each of which has

⁸ Federspiel, *Popular Indonesian Literature*, 8-12.

⁹ Nashruddin Baidan, *Perkembangan Tafsir Al-Qur'an di Indonesia* (Solo: Tiga Serangkai, 2003), 23-26.

been employed by Indonesian scholars to different degrees and in different historical contexts.¹⁰

The Tahlili Tradition and Its Indonesian Expressions

The *tahlili* method, which involves sequential, verse-by-verse exegesis of the entire Quran, has historically been the dominant mode of tafsir production in the Indonesian context. The most monumental example of this approach in the modern period is *Tafsir al-Misbah* by M. Quraish Shihab, a fifteen-volume work that combines rigorous engagement with classical Arabic scholarship with a distinctly Indonesian sensitivity to social and ethical concerns.¹¹ Shihab draws extensively on the work of Ibn Ashur, Sayyid Qutb, and Fazlur Rahman, while consistently grounding his interpretations in the cultural and social realities of Indonesian Muslim life. The widespread reception of *Tafsir al-Misbah* across educational, media, and popular Islamic contexts attests to the enduring appeal of the comprehensive *tahlili* approach when executed with scholarly depth and communicative accessibility.

A somewhat earlier but equally significant work in the *tahlili* tradition is *Tafsir al-Azhar* by Hamka (Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah), composed during the author's imprisonment under the Sukarno regime in the 1960s.¹² Hamka's commentary is notable for its fluent Indonesian prose, its engagement with literary and historical dimensions of the Quranic text, and its integration of Indonesian cultural references alongside personally reflective passages. *Tafsir al-Azhar* represents a remarkable moment of synthesis in which the reformist modernist orientation was combined with a deeply personal and spiritually engaged scholarly voice, producing a work that continues to be widely read and cited in Indonesian Islamic discourse.

The Rise of Thematic and Contextual Interpretation

From the 1980s onward, the *mawdu'i* or thematic method gained increasing prominence in Indonesian tafsir scholarship, reflecting broader trends in the Islamic world as well as the particular demands of an academic environment increasingly shaped by university-based Islamic studies programs within the IAIN and later UIN institutional framework.¹³ The thematic approach, which organizes Quranic verses according to subject matter rather than their canonical sequence, was seen as better suited to addressing specific contemporary issues such as social justice, gender equality, environmental ethics, and interfaith relations than the sequential *tahlili* method.

¹⁰ Gusmian, *Khazanah Tafsir Indonesia*, 45-80.

¹¹ M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir al-Misbah: Pesan, Kesan dan Keserasian Al-Qur'an*, 15 vols. (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2000), vol. 1, xv-xvi.

¹² Hamka, *Tafsir al-Azhar*, 30 vols. (Singapore: Pustaka Nasional, 1981), vol. 1.

¹³ Islah Gusmian, "Tafsir Al-Qur'an di Indonesia: Sejarah dan Dinamika," *Nun: Jurnal Studi Alquran dan Tafsir di Nusantara* 1, no. 1 (2015): 15-20, <https://doi.org/10.32459/nun.v1i1.7>.

Abdul Mustaqim's contributions to the epistemological foundations of this methodological shift have been particularly influential in Indonesian academic circles. His analysis traces the historical movement in Indonesian tafsir from a predominantly *bayani* (textualist) epistemology toward more *burhani* (rationalist) and *irfani* (intuitionist) orientations, arguing that this epistemological pluralism reflects a healthy maturation of the field toward greater intellectual self-awareness.¹⁴ This analysis resonates with Abdullah Saeed's broader argument that contemporary Quranic interpretation requires a contextually sensitive hermeneutic that takes seriously both the historical particularity of the Quranic revelation and the changing needs of Muslim communities in the present.¹⁵

Sahiron Syamsuddin has similarly argued for a hermeneutical approach that integrates the classical sciences of tafsir with insights from contemporary philosophical hermeneutics, particularly the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.¹⁶ This project of methodological integration, while not without critics who question the compatibility of Western hermeneutical categories with Islamic interpretive traditions, has produced a sophisticated body of theoretical reflection that distinguishes Indonesian tafsir scholarship from much of what is produced in other parts of the Muslim world. The resulting conversation between classical and modern interpretive frameworks has, in many respects, become a hallmark of graduate-level Quranic studies in the major Indonesian Islamic universities.

Contemporary Developments and Critical Challenges

The contemporary period, broadly understood as the post-*Reformasi* era from 1998 onward, has witnessed a remarkable proliferation of tafsir activity in Indonesia, encompassing academic scholarship, popular media productions, digital platforms, and community-based interpretive initiatives. This proliferation reflects both the freedom of religious expression that has characterized the post-authoritarian period and the intensified contestation over the meaning and authority of Islamic texts within a pluralistic democratic society.

Gender-Sensitive Hermeneutics and Progressive Tafsir

One of the most significant methodological innovations in contemporary Indonesian tafsir has been the emergence of gender-sensitive and feminist reading strategies. Scholars associated with civil society organizations such as Rahima and Fahmina, as well as researchers affiliated with gender studies centers within the UIN system, have developed approaches to Quranic

¹⁴ Mustaqim, *Epistemologi Tafsir Kontemporer*, 67-89.

¹⁵ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Quran: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London: Routledge, 2006), 3-12.

¹⁶ Syamsuddin, *Hermeneutika dan Pengembangan Ulumul Qur'an*, 35-60.

interpretation that foreground the concerns of women and marginalized communities, challenging exegetical traditions that have historically been produced by and for male scholars.¹⁷

These approaches draw on a range of international intellectual resources, including the pioneering work of Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, and Riffat Hassan in feminist Islamic hermeneutics, as well as indigenous Indonesian concepts of gender complementarity and the egalitarian currents within local Islamic traditions.¹⁸ Wadud's reading of the Quran, which insists on approaching the text with attention to gender justice as a central hermeneutical principle, has been particularly influential in Indonesian academic and activist circles.¹⁹ The practical implications of this gender-sensitive interpretive work have been significant, contributing to legal advocacy around issues including women's access to divorce, the minimum marriage age, and protections against domestic violence within the framework of Islamic family law.

The Challenge of Literal and Salafi Readings

At the same time, the post-*Reformasi* period has also witnessed the growing influence of Salafi and other scripturalist movements that promote a literalist approach to Quranic interpretation, emphasizing the direct application of classical Arabic exegetical categories and resisting what they characterize as the distortions introduced by rationalist or hermeneutically inflected readings.²⁰ These movements have found significant institutional support through social media platforms, satellite television, and transnational networks connecting Indonesian Muslims to Saudi Arabian and other Gulf-based religious institutions and funding sources.

The tension between progressive and literalist hermeneutical orientations reflects a broader global phenomenon in which Muslim communities are negotiating between the demands of textual fidelity and contextual relevance.²¹ In the Indonesian context, this negotiation is further complicated by the constitutional commitment to religious pluralism and the long-standing tradition of accommodating local customs within Islamic legal and interpretive practice. Scholars including Azyumardi Azra have argued that Indonesia's distinctive tradition of moderate, culturally embedded Islam, often

¹⁷ Islah Gusmian, "Bahasa dan Aksara Tafsir Al-Qur'an di Indonesia dari Tradisi, Hierarki hingga Kepentingan Pembaca," *Tsaqafah: Jurnal Peradaban Islam* 6, no. 1 (2010): 5-8, <https://doi.org/10.21111/tsaqafah.v6i1.77>.

¹⁸ Amina Wadud, *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1991).

¹⁹ Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, xix-xxi.

²⁰ Robert W. Hefner, "Islam, State, and Civil Society: ICMI and the Struggle for the Indonesian Middle Class," *Indonesia* 56 (1993): 3-5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3351133>.

²¹ Abdullah Saeed, "Rethinking 'Revelation' as a Precondition for Reinterpreting the Qur'an: A Qur'anic Perspective," *Journal of Quranic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1999): 93-96, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.1999.1.1.93>.

described through the concept of *Islam Nusantara*, provides a significant resource for resisting both religious exclusivism and the more extreme forms of textualist literalism.²²

Digital Media and the Democratization of Quranic Interpretation

The emergence of digital media platforms has fundamentally altered the landscape of Quranic interpretation in Indonesia, enabling new forms of access, production, and dissemination that bypass traditional gatekeepers of religious authority. Websites, YouTube channels, podcasts, and social media accounts devoted to Quranic commentary have proliferated, creating a vast and substantially unregulated ecosystem of interpretive activity accessible to any Indonesian with a mobile device and an internet connection.²³

This democratization of tafsir carries profound implications for questions of religious authority and epistemological legitimacy. When any individual with an online platform can produce and disseminate interpretations of the Quran to potentially millions of followers, the traditional criteria for evaluating interpretive competence, specifically mastery of Arabic, grounding in classical exegetical literature, and formal credentialing within recognized Islamic institutions, are increasingly challenged and relativized.²⁴ This challenge does not necessarily represent a deterioration of Quranic interpretation; it may equally be understood as an opening toward greater inclusivity and a more pluralistic hermeneutical culture. What it clearly demands, however, is the development of new frameworks for evaluating interpretive quality and new forms of critical media literacy among Indonesian Muslim publics.

Ecological Hermeneutics and the Environmental Question

A further notable development in contemporary Indonesian tafsir is the growing scholarly and activist attention paid to ecological and environmental themes within Quranic interpretation. Scholars and faith-based activists drawing on Quranic concepts such as *khalifah* (vicegerency over the earth), *fasad* (corruption and destructive behavior), and *mizan* (cosmic balance and equilibrium) have developed interpretive frameworks that position environmental stewardship as a religious obligation grounded in the Quranic worldview.²⁵ These eco-tafsir initiatives resonate powerfully with Indonesia's acute environmental challenges, including large-scale deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and heightened vulnerability to the effects of global climate

²² Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern 'Ulama' in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2004), 1-15.

²³ Gusmian, "Bahasa dan Aksara Tafsir Al-Qur'an di Indonesia," 15-17.

²⁴ Sahiron Syamsuddin, "Muhkam and Mutashabih: An Analytical Study of al-Tabari's and al-Zamakhshari's Interpretations of Q.3:7," *Journal of Quranic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1999): 63-65, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.1999.1.1.63>.

²⁵ Mustaqim, *Epistemologi Tafsir Kontemporer*, 112-120.

change. They represent a striking instance of how the Quranic text is being mobilized in response to pressing contemporary concerns that classical commentators could not have anticipated.

Farid Esack's broader project of liberation hermeneutics, while developed principally in the South African context rather than the Indonesian one, has also been influential in Indonesian progressive Islamic circles as a model for reading the Quran in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized.²⁶ The translatability of this hermeneutical project across different socio-political contexts speaks to the underlying universalism of the concerns it addresses and to the capacity of Quranic interpretation to generate new forms of solidarity across the boundaries of nation, ethnicity, and culture.

Concluding Remarks

This study has traced the development of tafsir scholarship in Indonesia from its classical Nusantara beginnings through the colonial and national independence periods to the complex and contested hermeneutical landscape of the present moment. Several conclusions may be drawn from this analysis.

First, Indonesian tafsir has never been a passive reception of Middle Eastern Islamic scholarship but has consistently involved active processes of cultural negotiation, linguistic adaptation, and contextual reorientation. From 'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Singkili's pioneering translation of classical Arabic commentary into Malay to M. Quraish Shihab's socially engaged exegesis and the contemporary experiments with gender-sensitive and ecological interpretation, Indonesian scholars have demonstrated a sustained commitment to making the Quranic text speak meaningfully to their own historical and cultural circumstances.

Second, the methodological diversity of Indonesian tafsir reflects a productive intellectual pluralism that resists reduction to any single interpretive paradigm. The coexistence of *tahlili* and *mawdu'i* approaches, of rationalist and spiritualist orientations, of classical and hermeneutically informed methods, suggests a field characterized by genuine intellectual vitality and openness to innovation that constitutes one of the distinctive strengths of Indonesian Islamic scholarship.

Third, the tensions between progressive and literalist readings of the Quran in contemporary Indonesia are not merely theological disagreements but are deeply shaped by political, institutional, and transnational dynamics. Any adequate scholarly account of Indonesian Islam must take these structural dimensions seriously, rather than treating the hermeneutical debate in purely intellectual terms.

Fourth, and finally, Indonesia's accumulated experience of tafsir scholarship offers a significant and still insufficiently recognized contribution

²⁶ Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 14-21.

to the global study of Islamic hermeneutics. As a Muslim-majority society in which diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural communities have long coexisted within a pluralist democratic framework, Indonesia represents a critical case study in how Islamic scripture can be interpreted in ways that affirm both religious commitment and civic plurality. Further research into the regional and vernacular dimensions of Indonesian tafsir promises to enrich and substantially complicate the picture presented in this article.

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