



## LIVING QUR'AN: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

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This research examines the phenomenon of the authority of the Qur'anic text in its interaction with local contexts through the Living Qur'an approach. Theologically, the Qur'an holds absolute authority as revelation; however, in social reality, this authority undergoes a process of recontextualization and negotiation to remain relevant to community culture. This study aims to describe how local communities receive and interpret the Qur'an beyond textual-normative boundaries. Using a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach, this research focuses on the subjective experiences of practitioners in religious activities. The theoretical framework includes Fazlur Rahman's thoughts on the Living Sunnah, Neal Robinson on audio-oral phenomena, and Ahmad Rafiq's classification of reception. The results indicate that in local contexts, the authority of the Qur'anic text transforms from cognitive authority to performative authority. Community reception is not merely exegetical but is predominantly aesthetic and functional, where the Qur'an is positioned as an "agency" that provides protection and spiritual identity. The conclusion of this study emphasizes that the Living Qur'an is a manifestation of the dynamization of revelation, keeping it alive (*salih li kulli zaman wa makan*) through creative dialogue with local wisdom without diminishing the sacredness of the original text.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an, theologically, is an absolute and final revelation; however, sociologically, it is a text that continually engages in dialogue with human reality. As the highest source of authority in Islam, the Qur'an does not merely remain a collection of normative-scriptural texts preserved in the muṣḥaf, but continuously transforms into a living phenomenon within society. This phenomenon, later known as the Living Qur'an, demonstrates that the authority of the Qur'anic text possesses a dynamic force when it comes into contact with local contexts and the collective consciousness of the Muslim community.

In the history of Islamic thought, efforts to bridge text and reality were pioneered by Fazlur Rahman through the concept of Living Sunnah and the theory of Double Movement. Rahman emphasized that the authority of revelation must be understood through its moral-ethical spirit in order to remain relevant amid changing times. On the other hand, Neal Robinson introduced a more specific phenomenological perspective by viewing the Qur'an as an audio-oral phenomenon that is experienced existentially by its adherents. For Robinson, the Qur'an is not merely "read" to comprehend its meaning, but also "heard" and "felt" in order to construct a sacred space within everyday life.

In Indonesia, studies on the interaction between text and context have been further strengthened through the thought of Ahmad Rafiq. He maps out that society's reception of the Qur'an is not always exegetical (*tafsīr*) in nature, but often functional and aesthetic. Within local contexts, the authority of the Qur'anic text frequently manifests in the form of rituals, traditions, and even the use of specific verses as means of protection or healing. This phenomenon is particularly intriguing to examine phenomenologically, as it reveals how society, as the subject, assigns subjective meanings to the sacred text—meanings that often transcend the boundaries of their Arabic language literacy.

However, amid the strong pull of globalization and textual puritanism, local-level Living Qur'an practices are often marginalized or regarded as deviations from the original meaning of the text. Therefore, this study aims to examine how the authority of the Qur'anic text is negotiated within local contexts through a phenomenological lens. By focusing on the subjective experiences of historical actors, this research is expected to clearly map how a revelation that is heavenly in origin remains grounded and functions as practical guidance (*hudā*) for everyday life within society.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical design. The primary approach used is phenomenology, which seeks to understand religious phenomena directly from the perspectives of the actors involved (the *emic* perspective). The main focus of this approach is to capture conscious experiences and the subjective meanings attributed by local communities to their practices of interaction with the Qur'anic text.

Data were collected through three main techniques. First, participant observation, in which the researcher is directly involved in ritual activities or the daily lives of the community in order to observe how Qur'anic verses are recited, positioned, and treated. Second, in-depth interviews, conducted to explore the informants' reasons, feelings, and beliefs. Questions were directed toward uncovering issues such as: "What does the recitation of these verses mean to you?" and "What do you feel when you perform this practice?" Third, documentation, involving the collection of supporting data in the form of photographs of activities, audio recordings, or historical records of local communities related to these practices.

Data analysis was carried out by following the phenomenological steps proposed by Edmund Husserl, namely: epoché (bracketing), in which the researcher suspends or sets aside all subjective prejudices and theological judgments (right/wrong) in order to view the phenomenon purely according to the informants' descriptions; phenomenological reduction, which involves filtering the data to identify the core or essence of community experiences; imaginative variation, which seeks to explore the relationships between these subjective meanings and broader social contexts; and meaning synthesis, which constructs a comprehensive description of the "essence" of Living Qur'an practices at the research site.

To ensure data validity, this study applies source triangulation (comparing data from different informants) and technique triangulation (comparing findings from observations with those obtained through interviews).

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Result**

#### **Living Qur'an: A Phenomenological Study**

Living Qur'an is one of the variants of Qur'anic studies that does not focus on textual analysis, but rather on social behavior that emerges from the interaction between society and the Qur'an. This approach is also known as The Qur'an in Everyday Life. In this perspective, the Qur'an is no longer viewed merely as a static object in the form of a muṣḥaf, but as a "living text" within society. This phenomenon arises from the community's responses or receptions of Qur'anic messages, which subsequently crystallize into traditions, rituals, and patterns of daily life.

To understand the Living Qur'an in depth, a phenomenological approach becomes highly relevant. Phenomenology seeks to capture the essence of religious practices based on the perspectives of the actors themselves (emic perspective). In other words, the researcher does not aim to judge whether a practice conforms to fiqh rulings or not, but rather to describe what meaning the practice holds for its practitioners. This process gives rise to religious practices rooted in the original text of the Qur'an yet embedded in social life and tradition. Therefore, the dialectic between the authority of the Qur'anic text and local contexts creates distinctive forms of Islamic identity. In Indonesia, the authority of the Qur'an often negotiates with local culture through a process of indigenization (pribumisasi). The Qur'anic text does not erase local traditions, but instead breathes new life into them.

The interaction between society and the Qur'an often transcends textual-normative boundaries. From a phenomenological perspective, communities tend to develop two primary types of reception. First is aesthetic reception, in which the Qur'an is positioned as an object of beauty – manifested through the art of recitation (tilāwah), calligraphy in traditional architecture, and the use of Qur'anic verses as sacred decorations. Second is functional reception, namely the use of the Qur'an for practical and pragmatic purposes in daily life, such as

reciting *Āyat al-Kursī* to protect a house, reading certain chapters in agricultural traditions to ward off pests, the routine recitation of *Sūrah al-Wāqī'ah* to seek sustenance, or the recitation of specific verses during *melet petteng* rituals (communal ceremonies for women in the fourth or seventh month of pregnancy), among others. Certain chapters and verses are also believed to possess healing (*al-shifā'*) or protective properties. Phenomenology helps reveal that the authority of the Qur'anic text has transformed from cognitive authority (understanding meaning) into performative authority (ritual practice).

This phenomenon demonstrates that Qur'anic authority in society is not always understood through intellectual reasoning (*dirāyah*), but often through inner experience and spiritual conviction (*riwāyah* and *faḍā'il*). Here, the text is no longer seen merely as a collection of legal propositions, but as an entity endowed with spiritual power capable of influencing both physical and metaphysical realities. In everyday life, people often feel a sense of peace and happiness when surrounded by Qur'anic verses or when engaging in activities that involve the recitation of the Qur'an.

Historically, Living Qur'an is not a new intellectual tradition within Qur'anic studies. Similar practices were already performed by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and his Companions, particularly in positioning the Qur'an as *al-Shifā'* (healing). A well-known narration recounts how several Companions encountered a tribal leader who had been bitten by a snake (or stung by a scorpion in another narration). One Companion recited *Sūrah al-Fātiḥah* over a glass of water and gave it to the leader to drink, who was subsequently healed by Allah's permission. This practice was later approved by the Prophet ﷺ. Likewise, a narration from Sayyidah 'Ā'ishah (ra) mentions that when the Prophet ﷺ was ill, he recited the *Mu'awwidhatayn* (*Sūrah al-Falaq* and *Sūrah al-Nās*) and recovered.

Many narrations thus demonstrate that Living Qur'an practices are not newly invented phenomena, but have existed since the time of the Prophet and the Companions. Living Qur'an was later formulated within academic discourse through various perspectives, generating terminologies that reinforce the Qur'an's essential relevance as *ṣāliḥ li-kulli zamān wa makān* (valid for all times and places).

## Scholarly Perspectives on Living Qur'an

### 1. Fazlur Rahman

Fazlur Rahman proposed the theory of historical double movement, arguing that a text revealed more than 1,500 years ago should not be read without considering contemporary contexts. Instead, its meanings must be interpreted in relation to the conditions in which people live today. Phenomenologically, Rahman viewed the authority of the Qur'an during the Prophet's time as dynamic, with society assigning meaning to revelation through concrete actions. Within Living Qur'an studies, this supports the idea that the Qur'an should indeed "live" within cultural practices rather than merely exist as a memorized

text.

Rahman's double movement theory is his most influential contribution for understanding how authoritative texts transition into modern or local contexts. The first step involves understanding the meaning of the text within its historical context (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). The second step involves extracting universal moral principles from that meaning and reapplying them to contemporary contexts. Thus, the indigenization of the Qur'an becomes a social phenomenon in which communities act as subjects who reinterpret the text to keep it functionally relevant – both spiritually and socially.

For Rahman, the ultimate authority of the Qur'an lies in its moral objectives rather than in its specific legal formulations. From a phenomenological perspective, this legitimizes local practices that may differ outwardly from literal interpretations but align substantively with Qur'anic values such as justice and public welfare. Adaptation, therefore, is not deviation, but an effort to keep the Qur'an "living."

## 2. Neal Robinson

In his research on the Qur'an in Pakistan, Neal Robinson identified three major phenomena in how Muslims relate to the Qur'an: listening to it, memorizing it, and experiencing its presence in daily life. Robinson was particularly fascinated by the literary structure of the earliest revelation (*Sūrah al-'Alaq* 1-5), noting its poetic qualities, such as rhyme and assonance, which characterize Qur'anic verses. He also emphasized the phonetic qualities of Arabic consonants, arguing that the Qur'an's soundscape plays a crucial role in conveying revelation.

Robinson emphasized that for Muslims, the Qur'an is not merely a book to be read visually, but an auditory and oral phenomenon. Rhythm, sound, and recitation shape religious consciousness. In Living Qur'an studies, this insight is crucial for examining traditions such as *murottal*, *simā'an*, and vocal *dhikr*, which create sacred spaces in public life.

Robinson further identified three modes of Qur'anic recitation: *ḥadr* (fast), *tartil* (slow), and *tadwīr* (moderate). He argued that understanding the Qur'an phenomenologically requires grasping the believer's worldview and rejecting the separation of text from its community. His approach shifts attention from "what the text means" to "how the text works on people," which lies at the heart of phenomenology.

## 3. Farid Esack

Farid Esack introduces a progressive dimension to Living Qur'an studies by focusing on liberation hermeneutics and social praxis. For Esack, the authority of the Qur'an is realized not in abstract theory but in concrete struggles against injustice. His experience under South Africa's apartheid regime shaped his view that Qur'anic authority manifests in resistance to oppression.

Esack argues that the Qur'an consistently addresses the conflict between

oppressors (mustakbirūn) and the oppressed (mustaḍ'afūn). Phenomenologically, this means studying how the Qur'an "lives" within social movements, functioning as a force for advocacy, empowerment, and justice. Meaning emerges through action (praxis), not reflection alone.

In Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism, Esack demonstrates how the Qur'an can function as a source of inter-human solidarity across religious boundaries. Phenomenologically, this shows how sacred texts become instruments of ethical action. Thus, Esack presents Living Qur'an as a transformative force – one that must be enacted, not merely read.

#### 4. Ahmad Rafiq

According to Ahmad Rafiq, Living Qur'an is a phenomenon of reception in which the Qur'an transcends textual boundaries and becomes embodied in social practice. He categorizes Qur'anic reception into three forms: Exegetical Reception: Efforts to understand Qur'anic meaning through interpretation (tafsīr), producing classical and modern exegetical works. Aesthetic Reception: Appreciation of the Qur'an's beauty through recitation styles and artistic expression. Functional Reception: The use of the Qur'an for practical purposes such as healing, protection, and ritual practice. From a phenomenological standpoint, Rafiq emphasizes the Qur'an's performative authority – its ability to transform behavior and consciousness regardless of linguistic comprehension. Living Qur'an thus becomes a study of how the Qur'an functions pragmatically and existentially in daily life, providing protection, tranquility, and communal identity.

## CONCLUSION

The authority of the Qur'anic text is not static within the muṣḥaf, but rather dynamic and functional as it interacts with local contexts. The phenomenon of the Living Qur'an demonstrates that communities do not merely position the Qur'an as a source of formal legal norms, but also as a living entity within the realm of consciousness and everyday practice. Through a phenomenological approach, it becomes evident that local communities engage in creative processes of reception, whereby textual authority often shifts from cognitive understanding of meaning toward practical, performative–functional utilization.

The thoughts of Fazlur Rahman, Neal Robinson, and Ahmad Rafiq collectively indicate that the indigenization of revelation requires a continuous dialectic between the sacred text and profane realities. In local contexts, the Qur'an emerges as a sacred canopy that both legitimizes and revitalizes local wisdom. Communities do not perceive a contradiction between obedience to the sacred text and the preservation of cultural identity; rather, they integrate the Qur'an as an essential component of their symbolic systems and as a source of solutions to life's challenges.

Ultimately, this study affirms that the truth of the Qur'an as a scripture relevant for all times and places (*ṣāliḥ li kulli zamān wa makān*) is demonstrated not merely through theological debates within academic spaces, but through the living pulse of traditions sustained by society. A phenomenological approach allows us to appreciate each local expression of religiosity as the highest form of reverence for the sacred text, wherein the Qur'an is no longer simply read, but truly "lived" (Living).

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