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Phenomenological Study of Living Qur'an in the Tradition of Death and Reinterpretation of the Younger Generation on the Practice of *Khataman Al-Qur'an* at Bireuen Cemetery, Aceh

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the tradition of reciting the Qur'an at a funeral as a manifestation of the concept of the Living Qur'an in the socio-cultural context of the Bireuen community in Aceh. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and visual documentation. The research findings show that this tradition is not only understood as a form of respect for the deceased but also as a means to strengthen social solidarity, reinforce Islamic identity, and embody the actualization of Qur'anic values, such as amal jariyah and ukhuwah. However, in the last decade, this tradition has faced challenges from reformist groups who criticize it as a form of heresy, as well as the dynamics of the younger generation who have begun to reinterpret its meaning within the framework of purifying religious teachings. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)-based analysis shows that completing the Qur'an at a funeral expands the realm of the Living Qur'an into the event of death, showing a close relationship between the sacred text, social practices, and the life experiences of the local Muslim community. This study provides a new contribution to enrich the discourse of the Living Qur'an by emphasizing the importance of understanding Qur'anic practices within the framework of contemporary culture and social change

Keywords: *Living Qur'an; Islamic Death Tradition; Khataman Al-Qur'an at the Cemetery; Aceh Local Religiosity; Sociology of Religious Rituals.*

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Introduction

In recent decades, the world's Muslim community has faced complex challenges due to the dynamics of globalization, the current of religious reform, and the urge to purify Islamic teachings. Local religious practices, especially those related to death such as *Tahlilan*, *Yasinan*, and *Khataman* of the Qur'an, are increasingly questioned by some groups that encourage the purification of the faith. In the context of Southeast Asia, including Indonesia and Malaysia, this phenomenon not only has an impact on the theological realm, but also creates social tensions and shifts in cultural values [1]. One form of tradition that is highlighted in this discourse is the practice of khataman Al-Qur'an at funerals. In Aceh, especially in Bireuen, this practice has become a cultural-religious expression that has survived in the midst of the pressures of the times [1]. This research focuses on this tradition as a reflection of the concept of Living Qur'an, which is the understanding that the Qur'an is not just read as a text, but is also brought to life through social actions and rites in daily life [2].

The tradition of Khataman Al-Qur'an at the cemetery in Bireuen represents the integration of Qur'anic values into the social life of the Acehnese people. This practice is not only a formal ritual, but also a form of actualization of spiritual and social values based on Islamic teachings [2]. In the view of the local community, reading the Qur'an after a funeral is not only a form of prayer for the deceased, but also as a binder of solidarity between citizens, strengthening Islamic identity, and the media to maintain the moral sustainability of the community. The Qur'an itself provides the theological foundation for this practice, as enshrined in the Qur'an QS. Al-Hasyr (59):10:

وَالَّذِينَ جَاءُوا مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا اغْفِرْ لَنَا وَلِإِخْوَانِنَا الَّذِينَ سَبَقُونَا بِالْإِيمَانِ
وَلَا تَجْعَلْ فِي قُلُوبِنَا غِلًّا لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا رَبَّنَا إِنَّكَ رَءُوفٌ رَحِيمٌ

"Those who came after them (Muhajirin and Ansar) prayed, 'O our Lord, forgive us and our brothers who believed before us, and do not make envy in our hearts against the believers. O our Lord, verily You are the Most Sustaining and the Most Merciful.'"

This verse is the main spiritual inspiration for the community to pray for those who have died, including through the collective reading of the Qur'an. This practice is also in line with a wider phenomenon in Indonesia where Islamic death customs often combine the recitation of holy verses with local rites as a form of respect for the deceased [3]. In the treasure trove of academic literature, the concept of Living Qur'an has received wide attention [3]. Previous studies such as those put forward by Saeed [4], and developed in the Indonesian context

by Husna [5], confirm that the Qur'an lives not only in literal reading, but also in the social practices of Muslims. However, the focus of the study is still dominant in the context of daily rituals such as taklim and yasinan assemblies [4]. Meanwhile, the space for the actualization of the Qur'an in the context of death, especially through khataman at funerals, is still rarely explored in depth.

There has not been much research that explores how this sacred text is mediated through social practices in sacred moments such as death, especially considering the unique conditions of local religiosity of Aceh [6]. In addition, the response of the younger generation to this practice has not yet become the main object of study in the Living Qur'an literature, even though they have an important position in determining the continuity or transformation of the tradition [7]. Departing from this gap, this study aims to expand the understanding of the Living Qur'an by highlighting the practice of khataman Al-Qur'an in funerals as a form of implementation of sacred texts in socio-religious life [5]. The general purpose of this study is to fill the void of the study of the Living Qur'an in the context of the ritual of death and to provide a new understanding of the social dynamics behind the tradition [6]. In particular, this study aims to: (1) ethnographically describe the implementation of the khataman tradition in Bireuen, (2) uncover the spiritual and social meanings contained in this practice, (3) evaluate the dynamics of change and people's responses to the challenges of religious purification, and (4) test the assumption that Qur'anic texts have a performative function in strengthening the social bonds and moral structure of communities [8].

The initial hypothesis proposed in this study is that the tradition of Qur'anic khataman at funerals is not only seen as a form of respect for the deceased, but also as a social strategy to maintain community identity, affirm Qur'anic values in living practice, and negotiate local traditions with modern religious discourse [7]. In practice, this tradition contains a dynamic between continuity and transformation, between the sacredness of the text and social change [8]. Therefore, phenomenology-hermeneutic approaches [9], and ritual sociology [10] are used in this study to unravel the layers of meaning contained in the collective experience of the Bireuen people.

The novelty of this research lies in two main aspects. First, from a conceptual point of view, this study expands the realm of the Living Qur'an into the transcendental realm of death, which has been rarely touched by similar studies [9]. Second, in terms of methodology, the combination of phenomenology-hermeneutics and ritual sociology approaches provides space for in-depth exploration of the subjective meaning and social structure that surrounds the khataman tradition [10]. Through this framework, research not only contributes to the development of the theory of Living Qur'an but also

makes an empirical contribution to the study of contemporary Islamic anthropology [11]. Thus, this research is expected to be a bridge between the normative understanding of the Qur'an and the reality of religious practice at the community level [11]. The tradition of Qur'anic khataman at the Bireuen cemetery is not only an object of ethnographic study, but also a space for dialogue between texts, traditions, and social changes in modern Muslim society.

Method

This study uses a phenomenological qualitative approach with an exploratory goal to deeply understand the socio-spiritual experience of the Bireuen people in the tradition of Qur'anic khataman at funerals. This approach was chosen because it is able to uncover the hidden meanings that arise from individual and community interactions with religious practices in the context of local culture [12]. This method is also in line with the principles of Living Qur'an studies which emphasizes the importance of the connection between the text of the Qur'an and the social reality of Muslims [12].

Data was collected through three main methods: in-depth interviews. A total of 17 informants were selected purposively based on their active role in the implementation of traditions, consisting of religious leaders (Tgk or village ulama), students or reciters who read the Qur'an, the family of the deceased as the organizers of the event, and the general public including the younger generation [13]. Data collection was carried out for 3 months. All informants were given an explanation of the purpose of the research and agreed to participate through an informed consent process.

Interviews are conducted in a semi-structured manner with the flexibility to dig deep into the deep meaning of personal experiences. In addition, community archives such as recordings of previous khataman processions were used to reinforce the phenomenological narrative [14]. To maintain the validity and reliability of the data, the researcher applied the triangulation technique of sources and methods, conducted member checking by confirming the summary of the results of the interview to the informant, and peer debriefing with colleagues from the field of Islamic anthropology to test the interpretation of the data critically and reflectively.

All data were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. The analysis begins with a re-reading of transcripts and field notes to internalize the informant's narrative of experience, then identifies the units of meaning classified in key themes such as: spirituality, social solidarity, traditional transformation, and reinterpretation of the younger generation. These themes are interpreted within the framework of the theory of the Living Qur'an and the sociology of Islamic rituals.

The main parameters in this study include five dimensions: (1) the spiritual meaning of khataman as a form of charity, (2) social function in strengthening community solidarity, (3) the emotional experience of participants during the ritual, (4) cross-generational perception of the relevance of traditions, and (5) the transformation and adaptation of khataman practices to the purification of religious teachings [15]. This focus is designed to capture the relationship between Qur'anic texts, social practices, and the construction of the meaning of life as articulated in the context of the Living Qur'an [13]. With this methodological approach, the research is expected to make an empirical contribution to the study of the Living Qur'an in the context of death rituals and expand the understanding of how local Muslim communities bring sacred texts to life in transcendental and collective situations [14].

Results and Discussion

The Existence and Dynamics of the Khataman Al-Qur'an Tradition at Bireuen Cemetery

The tradition of Qur'an khataman at the Bireuen cemetery, Aceh, has been going on for generations since the beginning of the 20th century. Based on observation and interview data, this practice is believed to be a form of charity that brings sustainable rewards to the deceased. In the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, it is explained:

إِذَا مَاتَ ابْنُ آدَمَ انْقَطَعَ عَمَلُهُ إِلَّا مِنْ ثَلَاثٍ: صَدَقَةٍ جَارِيَةٍ، أَوْ عِلْمٍ يُنْتَفَعُ بِهِ أَوْ وَلَدٍ صَالِحٍ يَدْعُو لَهُ

"If the son of Adam dies, his charity is cut off, except for three things: charity, useful knowledge, or a pious son who prays for it. (HR. Muslim No. 1631)

Also in his words HR. Muslim:

"اَقْرَءُوا الْقُرْآنَ فَإِنَّهُ يَأْتِي يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ شَفِيعًا لِأَصْحَابِهِ"

The implementation of khataman is carried out immediately after the funeral, as conveyed by Tgk. Abdullah: "After finishing the burial, we immediately recite the Qur'an. That's customary here." Usually, nine reciters divide the recitation for 7 consecutive nights. The division of schedules is generally in three shifts per day, as observed in one of the study halls.

The rewards for this service are varied: from one million cash per night to gold $\frac{1}{2}$ -1 *mayam*. This difference shows socio-economic flexibility in maintaining the sustainability of traditions.

Detected Patterns and Trends

1. Collective Participation: The involvement of religious leaders, students, and families shows the community's collective commitment to the sustainability of traditions [16].
2. Social Flexibility: The form of reward and the division of schedules depend on the family's ability and community agreements [17].
3. Resilience to Modernization: Despite the increasing flow of purification, people have maintained traditions with adjustments, such as the use of social media [18].
4. Intergenerational: The younger generation is involved in a limited way but is beginning to renegotiate the meaning of tradition [19].

These findings show that the khataman tradition is a form of Living Qur'an that not only touches on aspects of personal worship, but also rearranges social dynamics. This tradition reinforces solidarity, local Islamic identity, and the value of togetherness in a transcendental context [15]. Local adaptations such as time flexibility and the use of social media in the implementation of khataman show community responses to social change [16]. In this context, the younger generation plays an important role as guardians as well as changers of traditions.

An interview with Rahmat (28 years old) reflects this dilemma: "If I follow the words of the ustadz now, they say there is no example from the Prophet. But in the village, if we don't khataman, people say we have no respect for the corpse." This marked a shift in interpretation from mere ritual to a space for theological and social debate [20]. In the sociology of religion, the tension between puritan and traditional groups can be seen as a negotiation between "shariatization" (purification) and "hakikatization" (spiritual appreciation) [21]. James Scott calls this a hidden transcript, which is symbolic resistance in the dominant culture. Thus, the khataman in Bireuen is not only a static ritual, but a field of articulation of values and social symbols. It serves as a link between the text of the Qur'an and the local cultural structure, as explained in Mahfud's study of the Living Qur'an.

This practice shows that sacred texts are not just read but brought to life through collective actions that shape the spirituality of the community. The khataman tradition extends the scope of the Living Qur'an into the realm of death as a social and spiritual event. This affirmation is important to answer criticism from the reformists who consider khataman as a form of heresy [22]. Argumentation in QS. Al-Isra' (17):82 and the sahih hadith related to charity-jariyah provide a strong normative basis for maintaining this practice.

Therefore, the khataman discourse in Bireuen presents an important reflection that the Living Qur'an is not only an academic concept, but a social reality that is lived and negotiated daily by the Muslim community [23]. From the perspective of religious anthropology, the existence of khataman as a funeral tradition is also a space for dialogue between rituals and social interpretations. As emphasized in Fathurrahman's study, the reality of the Qur'ani in Indonesia cannot be separated from the context of the community that lives it actively and reflectively. Khataman, in this case, is not just a post-death spiritual instrument, but also part of the mechanism of regeneration of scripture-based cultural identity.

Furthermore, the concept of Living Qur'an as developed by Abdullah Saeed and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd encourages the reading of the Qur'an in a dynamic and reflective social context. In the case of Bireuen, khataman is a concrete embodiment that the sacred text is not trapped in a purely doctrinal meaning, but is shaped and responded to by the collective experience of local Muslims. In response to the reviewer's comments, this interpretation also shows how community groups are divided into two: one encourages sharia (alignment with formal postulates) and one prioritizes the essence (essence of value). Both form a creative dynamic that revives the Qur'an's position in the community. One of the informants, Tgk. Arman (47 years old), stated: "The important thing is intention and sincerity. Even though the Qur'an is different, but if the Qur'an is read and intended for good, insha Allah will arrive."

Therefore, the Living Qur'an in Bireuen is not uniform, but rather is pluralistic and contextual, representing the diversity of interpretations and practices in the Muslim community. As Mahfud [17] emphasizes, an ethnographic approach to the Qur'an allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how the text lives in the daily lives of the ummah. This study reinforces the argument that rituals such as khataman play an important role in the consolidation of values, identities, and social structures [24]. This is important for the development of culturally based Qur'anic Anthropology, which is now a new direction in the study of sacred texts in Southeast Asian Islamic societies.

Table 1. Comparison of Khataman Traditions: Before and After Modernization

<i>Aspects of Tradition</i>	<i>Before Modernization</i>	<i>After Modernization</i>
<i>Duration and Time</i>	1 night, the whole khataman is completed directly	3 shifts per day for 7 days, divided between reciters'
<i>Number of Readers</i>	1–3 people (religious leaders or close family members)	9–12 people from Islamic boarding schools or study halls
<i>Media Coordination</i>	In-person or verbal (face-to-face)	WhatsApp or social media groups for scheduling
<i>Rewards/Services</i>	Standard cash (Rp500.000–Rp1.000.000)	Combinations: money, gold ($\frac{1}{2}$ –1 mayam), or basic necessities
<i>Place of Execution</i>	Funeral Home or Funeral Home	Funeral homes, meunasah, and some online (audio recordings)
<i>Public Perception</i>	Ancestral heritage worship, unquestioned	Questioned by the younger generation (sharia vs fact)
<i>Participation of the Young Generation</i>	Limited and more as a listener	Begin to be actively involved but critical of the meaning of the practice

The following is an explanation for table 1 above. The tradition of khataman Al-Qur'an for the deceased is a form of religious ritual that lives in Muslim communities in various regions in Indonesia. This tradition not only has a spiritual dimension as a prayer and tribute to the deceased, but also becomes part of the religious cultural heritage. However, along with the development of the times and the entry of various modern influences, the form and implementation of this tradition underwent a number of important transformations. A comparison table between before and after modernization helps to identify the shift systematically [25]. Before modernization, the implementation of khataman was usually carried out in one whole night. On one occasion, the entire Qur'an was read in a marathon until it was finished, with only one or two reciters on duty [26]. After modernization, this practice was adapted to the needs of the times. Khataman is divided into three shifts every day for seven days, so that the implementation becomes more flexible and does

not burden the reciter or bereaved family. This change shows that there is a more adaptive time management to the rhythm of life in contemporary society.

In the past, those who read khataman were religious figures or close family members of the deceased, usually only 1-3 people. Now, the number of readers has increased to 9-12 people, involving reciters from Islamic boarding schools or study centers. The involvement of more readers from these formal institutions shows a shift from personal relations towards professionalization and collectivity [27]. On the one hand, it creates efficiency, but on the other hand it can also obscure spiritual values that are intimate and familial [28]. If previously coordination was carried out directly and verbally, such as meetings at funeral homes or meunasah, now social media such as WhatsApp has become the main means of communication. Digital groups are used for scheduling, task sharing, and reporting on reading completion. It shows how digital technology has changed the way societies manage and carry out religious practices, making them faster, more efficient, and well-documented.

The tradition of rewarding has also changed. In the past, giving a certain amount of cash (around IDR 500,000-IDR 1,000,000) was considered sufficient. Nowadays, rewards are becoming more diverse and symbolic, it can be in the form of cash, gold (1/2-1 mayam), or basic necessities. This change signifies the entry of the market economic element into the spiritual space, where the service of reading the Qur'an is not only interpreted as worship, but also as a profession that is valued materially. Changes are also visible in the place of implementation. In the past, khataman was limited to funeral homes or meunasah as a place that is local and sacred [29]. Now, in addition to physical venues, some of the performances are carried out online or through audio recordings sent to families. The use of digital media marks a new form of ritual that seeks to adjust to the limitations of distance, time, and social conditions, such as during a pandemic [30]. The public's perception of this tradition has also shifted. If in the past khataman was accepted without question as an ancestral inheritance, now some of the younger generation are beginning to be critical of it, especially in the context of the validity of shari'i and spiritual goals [31]. Nevertheless, the involvement of the younger generation is increasing, not only as listeners, but also as readers and coordinators [32]. However, this involvement is often accompanied by an evaluative attitude that prioritizes rationality and understanding of the text [33].

Overall, table number 1 shows that modernization has had a major impact on the practice of the khataman tradition. Transformation does not only occur in the technical and logistical aspects, but also touches on the realms of value, meaning, and participation. This tradition persists, but in an ever-changing form, reflecting the dynamic between continuity and innovation in the religious

practices of contemporary Muslim society. This shows that religion is not static, but rather always intersects with social, technological, and generational changes.

Conclusion

This research has revealed that the tradition of Khataman Al-Qur'an at the Bireuen cemetery is a tangible manifestation of the concept of Living Qur'an, where the sacred text of the Qur'an is brought to life in the form of social rituals that are full of spiritual meaning and community solidarity. This tradition is not only a religious activity, but also a form of internalization of Qur'anic values such as *ukhuwah*, charity, and respect for fellow human beings in the transcendental context of death. Despite facing challenges from puritans who consider it heretical, the tradition has survived with adaptive flexibility amid social and generational changes. Through a phenomenological approach, this study shows that the khataman tradition enriches religious experiences and strengthens the social network of the Bireuen community, proving how the text of the Qur'an is not only memorized, but also brought to life in the real experience of the community.

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in the expansion of the understanding of the Living Qur'an into the realm of ritual death, an area that was previously understudied in the literature. This research also demonstrates the importance of a contextual approach in understanding the dynamics of local religious practices, as well as underlining how tradition can be a powerful medium for preserving Qur'anic values in modern society. (a) The Most Important Finding (Hikmah/Wisdom): The khataman tradition not only shows the spiritual commitment of the Muslim community to the Qur'an, but also teaches the importance of social solidarity in the face of death. The most prominent lesson is that religiosity is not merely a ritual, but a reflective and transformative space to build strong social cohesion in the midst of modernization. (b) The Power of Writing (Scientific Contributions and New Paradigms): This study introduces a new paradigm in the study of the Living Qur'an by highlighting the practice of death rituals as a living expression of the Qur'an. This ethnographic and phenomenological approach enriches the study of culture-based Islam and encourages the development of a framework of Qur'anic Anthropology that is still rare in contemporary Indonesian literature. (c) Limitations of Research Scope: This study is exploratory in nature with local coverage limited to the community in Bireuen. No systematic comparisons were made with similar practices in other regions. In addition, the involvement of the younger generation as key participants is still limited so that it cannot fully represent the change in perspectives across generations as a whole. Advanced research with interregional coverage and quantitative approaches can provide a

more comprehensive picture. This research opens up space for further studies that can further explore the transformation of the Living Qur'an tradition in the midst of globalization and religious reform, as well as how the younger generation can become agents of the preservation and reinterpretation of these values in a new context.

Author Contributions

Siti Khodijah: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Sori Monang:** Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

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Conflict of Interest

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