Sounding the Sacred: Qur'anic Soundscapes in Javanese Muslim Traditions

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Abstract

This study examines how sound and community are essential for understanding the Qur'an in Javanese Muslim settings, where recitation is essential. It investigates how Qur'anic soundscapes serve as a form of contextual tafsīr during communal rituals. The research was conducted in Yogyakarta, Kudus, and Surabaya from February to June 2025. This study employs participant observation and informal interviews to examine Qur'anic recitation within communal gatherings, including pengajian wetonan, tahlilan, and slametan. The findings show that sound serves as an embodied hermeneutics, influenced by emotional resonance and Javanese values such as rukun (harmony) and unggah-ungguh (respect). Kyais and pesantren communities are key in mediating these interpretations. This work contributes to contextual Qur'anic studies by framing listening as a mode of exegesis that encompasses sonic, affective, and communal dimensions of Javanese Islam.

Keywords: *Qur'anic Soundscapes; Contextual Tafsir; Javanese Islam; Auditory Hermeneutics; Tradition.*

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Introduction

The Qur'an, as the fundamental scripture of Islam, has long inspired a diverse range of interpretive traditions throughout history and across various regions. More than just a text, the Qur'an is present in the daily lives of Muslims through its recitation, listening, and communal remembrance [1]. In Indonesia, especially on the island of Java, this engaging connection with the Qur'an is manifested through a lively and vibrant auditory experience of recitations and rituals [2] These practices, which reflect both reverence for the text and cultural representation, are a testament to the richness and vibrancy of Indonesian culture. Much Qur'anic scholarship has focused on textual interpretation—*tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr and tafsīr bi al-ra'y*—while often neglecting the lived and auditory dimensions of understanding the Qur'an [3].

Nonetheless, there exists a significant lack of research in scholarly studies of the Qur'an regarding the examination of soundscapes as a means of interpretation. The Qur'an, experienced as an auditory element, has not been thoroughly analyzed, despite the importance of recitation (tilawah) in Islamic worship. Research focused on the auditory aspects of the Qur'an (Nurtawab[4]; Daneshgar[5]; Ali[6] ;Abaza[7])has primarily concentrated on the Middle Eastern context, thereby leaving Southeast Asia overlooked, mainly in this field. This study aims to address that void by situating Javanese recitational practices within the broader context of contextual tafsir studies.

While several recent studies have explored the connection between the Qur'an and cultural practices in Indonesia, this paper offers a distinct perspective. For instance, Syamsuddin[8] investigated local interpretations within pesantren settings, while Widiyanto[9] examined how the Javanese values of *rukun* and *unggah-ungguh* affect religious observance. Similarly, research conducted by Boogert[10], Mustaqim[11], and Hilmy[12] has shed light on the cultural diversity within Javanese Islam. This study departs from previous works by focusing specifically on auditory tafsir, a dimension rarely explored in Indonesian Qur'anic studies.

This perspective provides a framework for understanding how sound and listening shape meaning, evoke emotions, and foster social connections. The role of sound in religious life is examined through soundscapes and acoustemology, highlighting how communities shape perception and meaning. Murray Schafer defines soundscapes as cultural environments that influence social experience, while Steven Feld's acoustemology emphasizes that listening creates meaning, memory, and emotion [13]. This study focuses on Javanese Qur'anic recitation as an acoustic field where interpretation arises from embodied listening, collective participation, and ritual performance.

The primary issue addressed in this study is the insufficient understanding of how the Qur'an is experienced through sound in Javanese communities and how this experience serves as a form of contextual exegesis. Although previous research has delved into the textual and ritual dimensions of Qur'anic interpretation, the sonic aspect remains underexplored. Thus, the objective of this research is to examine how Qur'anic soundscapes in Java represent vibrant interpretations that demonstrate the evolving relationship among text, tradition, and community.

The research is focused on the question: How do Javanese Qur'anic soundscapes serve as a form of contextual tafsir that integrates the textual, emotional, and social dimensions of faith? This question places the study within the framework of contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics while broadening its scope to include lived religious practice. By viewing recitation as both an act of devotion and a means of interpretation, the study aims to bridge the gap between *tafsīr 'ilmī* (scientific exegesis) and *tafsīr al-wāqi'ī* (contextual or lived exegesis)[14].

This research highlights the importance of sound in interpreting the Qur'an within the context of tafsir. The study highlights how listening and reciting together create a sense of community. It explains that meaning is formed and changes through these shared experiences. Kyais and pesantren leaders connect written texts with spoken words. They shape understanding in Javanese Islam by mixing written commentary with oral teaching [15].

This study offers significant contributions both theoretically and empirically. It enriches the exploration of the Qur'an by integrating insights from scholarly research, cultural contexts, and lived religious experiences. On an empirical level, it documents local practices that illustrate the Qur'an as a vibrant and embodied revelation [16]. This study enhances our understanding of Javanese Islam and provides practical insights relevant to Muslim communities throughout Southeast Asia.

Ultimately, this research seeks to reposition Qur'anic recitation as a central element of contextual *tafsir*—an interpretive act that transcends textual boundaries and engages deeply with human experience [17]. By examining how the Qur'an is sounded, heard, and lived, the paper reaffirms the importance of oral tradition in nurturing the moral and emotional dimensions of faith. As stated in the Qur'an, "He it is Who sends down tranquility into the hearts of the believers" (QS. al-Fath: 4). This revelation continues to impact both words and sound in the lives of believers. It provides a new understanding of the ongoing connection between the divine message and how people practice their faith.

Literature Review

The scholarly study of the Qur'an has historically concentrated on textual approaches, emphasizing philology, classical tafsīr traditions, and legal reasoning. Much of this scholarship has prioritized written commentary — *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr and tafsīr bi al-ra'y* — over the auditory and embodied experiences of revelation. Recent research in Indonesia and Southeast Asia indicates an imbalance in this focus, noting that the auditory aspects of Qur'anic engagement have been underexplored, despite the significance of recitation in Muslim devotional practices. This literature review synthesizes four key areas of scholarship related to Qur'anic soundscapes in Javanese Muslim traditions: textual hermeneutics, the anthropology of sound, Indonesian contextual tafsīr, and ethnographic studies of regional ritual and recitation practices. Exploring how soundscapes shape interpretive frameworks can reveal overlooked dimensions of Qur'anic understanding and address current research gap.

Textual and Modern Qur'anic Hermeneutics

Modern Qur'anic hermeneutics in Indonesia is characterized by contributions from scholars like Lukman[18] and Rohman[19] , who examine the intellectual development of tafsīr (interpretation of the Qur'an). These discussions often take place within the realms of literary analysis, doctrinal debates, and the historical context of classical commentaries. Highlighting this increasing methodological diversity can inspire the audience to appreciate the richness of Current interpretative approaches. However, they also reveal a notable lack of focus on the roles of sound, listening, and performative recitation as vital components of the exegetical process.

Sound, Listening, and Religious Experience

The theoretical underpinnings for examining sound as a method of creating meaning are rooted in Schafer's notion of the soundscape and Feld's concept of acoustemology, both of which highlight listening as a culturally contextualized form of understanding. These frameworks have not been extensively applied in Indonesian Qur'anic studies, but their relevance is growing. Scholars such as Hegland[20], Harris[21], and Weinrich[22] have demonstrated how religious emotions, ethical formation, and communal identity are expressed through voice, performance, and embodied rituals. Applying Schafer's and Feld's theories to Qur'anic recitation can deepen insights into how auditory elements shape religious experience and interpretation, thus filling a notable gap in Current scholarship.

Contextual Tafsir and Local Religious Epistemologies

Indonesian scholars of contemporary tafsīr, such as Syamsuddin[23] and Mustaqim [24], advocate interpretive approaches rooted in social realities and cultural sensibilities. Research on pesantren-based exegesis, including works by Mustaqim and Gusmian[25], highlights the importance of oral transmission, dialogical learning, and vernacular commentary as key components of local hermeneutics. These studies demonstrate that Javanese pesantren already employ forms of contextual reasoning, even when these are not explicitly identified as such. However, the analyses primarily focus on textual discourse rather than on the auditory processes—such as voice modulation, rhythm, and collective recitation—that produce meaning in practice. Exploring these auditory elements can deepen understanding and inspire curiosity about sound's interpretive role.

Javanese Ritual, Islamic Practice, and the Social Life of Sound

Research on Javanese Islamic rituals provides insights into the role of ritual sound in shaping communal experiences. Nasir[26], Geertz [27], Nurwendah[28], and Rasmussen[29] describe Javanese religiosity as a synthesis of Islamic piety, Javanese aesthetics, and communal ethics, including concepts such as *rukun* and *unggah-ungguh*. Studies on *slametan*, *tahlilan*, and *pengajian* reveal ritual environments characterized by a rich sonic texture, in which Qur'anic recitation serves as a key element in fostering social cohesion, memory, and moral development. Research on *kyai* authority by authors such as Azra[30], Machmudi[31], and Howell & Bruinessen [32] further illustrates how oral pedagogy—incorporating aspects like tone, cadence, and improvisation—facilitates the mediation of theological meaning and the preservation of interpretive lineages. Yet, the limited conceptualization of recitation as a form of tafsīr highlights a significant gap, suggesting avenues for future theoretical exploration.

Method

This study, characterized by its qualitative methodology, seeks to gain a deep insight into the understanding of the Qur'an within Javanese Muslim traditions. The scope includes analyzing the recitation, interpretation, and communal enactment of verses, enriching the study's depth [33]. By focusing on these aspects, the method examines how the Qur'an influences religious activities and community life [34].

The study used three primary data collection techniques: participant observation, informal interviews, and field note documentation. The researcher attended 26 ritual events across three sites, including 12 *pengajian wetonan*, eight

tahlilan, and six *slametan* gatherings, observing vocal patterns, participation, spatial acoustics, and emotional responses. Informal interviews with 32 participants—comprising kyais, *santri*, women's members of women's *majelis taklim*, youth reciters, and lay congregants—were conducted in *Bahasa Indonesia* and Javanese, lasting 20–60 minutes each. Selection was through purposive and snowball sampling, with verbal consent obtained and anonymity respected. The researcher's Javanese Muslim background aided access to the communities, though reflexive attention was paid to the dual role as participant and observer. Field notes captured instances in which the researcher's positionality affected interpretation and participant engagement [35]. Data analysis involved three stages: open coding of transcripts and notes to identify recurring themes; thematic analysis to organize codes into categories such as embodied listening and moral resonance; and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the personal significance attached to Qur'anic recitation [36].

A comparative analysis across Yogyakarta, Kudus, and Surabaya revealed contrasts and continuities in soundscape practices, indicating how local culture shapes Qur'anic listening. This comprehensive approach underscores that Javanese Qur'anic soundscapes reflect dynamic, contextually grounded tafsir rooted in ritual, emotion, and community participation.

Result and Discussion

Qur'anic Soundscapes as a Living Hermeneutic

In Javanese Muslim life, the Qur'an is not just a written or recited text; it is a transformative presence that shapes communal and spiritual experiences. The act of reading (tilawah) transcends mere engagement with the text; it embodies an experience in which sound, rhythm, and emotion converge to create religious significance [37]. Thus, Qur'anic recitation metamorphoses into an interpretive performance[38]. In this process, theology is not only expressed but also heard, felt, and integrated into the sensory and social fabric of everyday life, inspiring a profound change in the community[39].

In Yogyakarta, the spiritual essence of the Qur'an is expressed through the traditions of pesantren and community gatherings that combine scholarship with devotion. At *Pondok Pesantren Krapyak*—one of Java's oldest centers for Qur'anic recitation and qira'at studies—students participate in nightly *pengajian wetonan*, where verses are recited in a call-and-response format under the guidance of senior kyais. The atmosphere during these sessions is profoundly meditative; the harmonious voices, the subtle scent of incense, and the hum of cicadas together create a sensory experience filled with reverence [40].

In nearby neighborhoods like Kotagede and Kauman, smaller *majelis taklim* create a spiritual atmosphere in homes. Listeners often describe the experience as fostering *ketenangan batin* (inner peace), a tranquility that arises not from intellectual reflection but from an embodied resonance [41].

In Kudus, a town known for its rich Islamic heritage and home to the revered Makam Sunan Kudus and the historic Menara Kudus Mosque, the Qur'an comes to life through *dzikir* (remembrance) and *tahlilan* (commemorative) ceremonies. These gatherings often take place in the courtyards of local pesantren, such as Pondok Pesantren Yanbu'ul Qur'an, founded by KH. M. Arwani Amin, or during haul commemorations near the Menara complex. During these events, hundreds of devotees join together in rhythmic remembrance. The sound of the city becomes "acoustic theology." In this experience, the community's voices create a strong sense of a divine presence. Participants frequently share how the layered recitations resonate through the narrow alleys of *Kauman* and *Langgar Dalem*, merging sacred rhythm with communal intimacy [42]. Many describe moments when these reverberations dissolve the boundary between the human and the divine, nurturing a deep *kedekatan dengan Allah* (closeness to God). This collective embodiment of scripture supports Sirry's [43] insight that sound conveys theological meaning beyond mere text. It opens the door to understanding faith not just through beliefs, but through the deep emotions, the connections we feel, and the rich tapestry of devotion that colors our experiences.

In Surabaya, Indonesia's second-largest city, known for its vibrant urban religious activity, soundscapes of the Qur'an fill both traditional and modern environments. At *Masjid Cheng Ho*, where Islamic devotion merges with Chinese-Indonesian architectural influences, tilawah events unite a diverse group of attendees who perceive the Qur'an as both an artistic and a spiritual experience [44]. Additionally, at *Pondok Pesantren Al-Jihad Surabaya*, situated in the lively Wonocolo district, young reciters hone their abilities in Qur'anic melody (nagham) and engage in digital da'wah by broadcasting their performances online. Loudspeakers relay these recitations throughout neighborhoods from Gubeng to Ketintang, weaving sacred rhythms into the backdrop of traffic and daily activities. This convergence of faith, technology, and contemporary urban life redefines Surabaya's soundscapes into a blended devotional space—highlighting how the Qur'an's enduring voice continues to echo within Indonesia's digital and metropolitan heartbeat today [45].

The sound of the Qur'an is essential for creating a shared moral atmosphere at all three sites. It fosters an ethical practice of listening that shapes the listener's disposition towards the divine. In Javanese culture, this moral listening promotes respect for values such as *rukun* and *unggah-ungguh*, blending

religious listening with social sensitivity. Listening goes beyond mere hearing of God's word; it harmonizes individuals, reinforcing the Qur'an's influence on the moral fabric of Javanese society.

Recitation events are shaped by a sensitivity to both divine presence and communal etiquette [46]. The careful modulation of voice, strategic timing of pauses, and the collective rhythm of responses embody a sense of togetherness. This performative awareness transforms the sound of the Qur'an into a means of social regulation, teaching participants how to balance spiritual reverence with social respect [47]. The Qur'an connects different ideas: it links the spiritual with the community, sound with silence, feelings with rules [48]. This communication promotes a deep sense of togetherness among those involved.

The Javanese Qur'anic soundscapes serve as a living interpretation: a continual dialogue between divine revelation and human experience. Through recitation and remembrance, the Qur'an transcends mere text [49]; it occupies the acoustic, emotional, and cultural realms of community life [50]. Essentially, it becomes a living voice, resonating in the hearts and harmonies of its listeners. Through every breath of devotion, it serves both as an interpreter and something that is interpreted, creating a strong connection between the sacred and the individual.

Resonant Knowledge: *Kyai* and the Living Tafsir

In Yogyakarta, the soundscapes of Islamic learning are a captivating experience, characterized by the rhythmic cadence of the *pengajian wetonan*—weekly gatherings where students sit cross-legged around a *kyai* [51], who reads and interprets the Qur'an. In various pesantrens located near Kotagede and Bantul, kyais recite sections of *Surah Al-Baqarah* and *Surah Yasin*, blending traditional interpretations, such as *Tafsir al-Jalālayn*, with ethical stories and local sayings. Their approach merges accurate scriptural interpretation with an intimate storytelling style, turning Arabic exegesis into an engaging educational experience accessible to both *santri* and local villagers. This dialogical teaching exemplifies how pesantren education bridges classical scholarship and social expertise, turning textual learning into a shared ethical encounter that is both enlightening and intriguing.

Yogyakarta's *pesantren* is a place where the kyai's voice is not just heard, but felt. Listeners respond to the kyai's words with murmured affirmations or quiet repetition, actively participating in the creation of meaning [52]. The kyai's measured voice—part sermon, part recitation—is not just a sound, but a powerful medium of transmission and a performative ritual [53]. Here, the Qur'an is not just a text but a living presence, expressed through sound and close connections with others. The use of Javanese idioms to interpret Arabic verses is

a prime example of a vernacular hermeneutic that localizes revelation while preserving its theological depth, underlining the influence and power of the kyai's voice.

In Kudus, the kyais' authority is intertwined with the moral economy of *gotong royong*—mutual assistance and collective harmony. During evening *pengajian* sessions in village mosques, kyais often encourage participants to discuss or extend their commentary, especially after reciting *Surah Yasin* or *Al-Mulk*. This participatory process of interpretation, shaped by local concerns such as harvest rituals, kinship obligations, and village ethics, underscores the community's active role in shaping the educational experience. This communal exegesis reflects what Ricklefs [54] calls the "performative continuum" of Javanese Islam, where devotion and discourse merge within shared ritual spaces.

Kudus pesantren also maintains oral genealogies that link current kyais to previous generations of ulama from *Mecca*, *Hadhramaut*, and *Demak*. These oral transmission chains, frequently recited at the beginning of tafsir sessions, establish local authority within the broader context of global Islamic scholarship [55]. Nevertheless, the interaction remains profoundly personal: the meanings of the Qur'an are revealed through gestures, tones, and mutual listening. Such exchanges elevate tafsir into a form of embodied remembrance—knowledge conveyed not just through text but also through breath and rhythm.

Surabaya offers a unique experience. In urban neighborhoods like Wonokromo and Gubeng, younger kyais lead *majelis taklim* and inspire others. They share oral tafsir in both digital and public spaces. Loudspeakers broadcast nightly *tahlilan* through busy streets, and some pesantren stream their sessions on Facebook or YouTube. A *kyai* may teach in front of a simple camera setup, switching between Arabic and Javanese as they answer questions from the online chat. These activities demonstrate how Indonesian Islam evolves with new media while retaining its spiritual essence.

The oral *tafsir* in Surabaya illustrates both persistent elements and change. Although the kyais' role as educators remains prominent, their audience now includes participants who join remotely. The ritual auditory environment—which consists of chanting, recitation, and invocation—persists but is now shared through networks and devices, broadening the sensory experience of worship. Recent research on digital *majelis taklim* [56] shows that these online assemblies transform Islamic education into a blended environment of faith, connection, and auditory engagement.

In Yogyakarta, Kudus, and Surabaya, the kyais' role is essential as both scholars and cultural intermediaries in the practice of tafsir, the interpretation of the Qur'an. This tradition is characterized by its oral nature and ability to adapt

over time [57]. The similarities found among these cities not only pertain to the content of Qur'anic exegesis but also to its auditory tradition—the powerful expression of faith conveyed through the human voice.

Whether in the quiet setting of a *pesantren* courtyard, the communal atmosphere of a village mosque, or on digital platforms, the Qur'an remains an active segment of daily life and conversation. The kyai's voice ensures that the teachings of revelation continue to resonate, stay relevant, and are actively integrated into contemporary Indonesian society [58].

Ritual Sound and Collective Memory in Javanese Islam

The auditory aspect of Islamic rituals in Java illustrates how faith is perpetually revitalized through listening. In *tahlilan* and *slametan* ceremonies, the recitation of the Qur'an goes beyond mere text, evolving into a communal activity that connects memory, familial ties, and ethical feelings. Kapferer's[59] notion of "social scripture" clearly captures this situation: revelation becomes a relational experience through sound. This essay examines how the performative recitation of the Qur'an, with its distinctive sound, not only influences moral frameworks but also significantly contributes to the preservation of shared memories within distinct regional sound environments, drawing on insights from Kudus, Yogyakarta, and Surabaya.

In Kudus, historically recognized as *Kota Santri* (City of the Devout), ritual sound serves as a form of devotion and part of the heritage. The city's religious character is deeply rooted in its historical ties to *Sunan Kudus*, one of the *Wali Songo*, alongside its extensive network of over 80 *pesantren*. In the *Kauman* and *Langgar Dalem* neighborhoods, Qur'anic recitation during tahlilan events often takes place in close-knit courtyards lit by oil lamps. Attendees describe this experience as *ngrasuk rasa*—"absorbing the feeling." The sound is believed to "*adem ing manah*" (cool the heart), connecting the remembrance of the deceased with moral tranquility for those still living. In this manner, theological understanding is expressed through acoustic participation rather than purely analytical comprehension [60].

In Yogyakarta, a metropolis famous for its diverse blend of intellect and culture, the sound of Qur'anic recitation holds a unique interpretive significance. As both an academic center, home to *Gadjah Mada University*, and the royal capital of the Yogyakarta Sultanate, the city combines scholarly rationality with traditional mysticism (kebatinan). The Kotagede and Kauman areas show how slametan rituals intertwine Qur'anic verses with Javanese poetic rhythms, frequently alternating between Arabic recitation and *macapat* tunes [61]. Local religious leaders refer to this practice as *ngaji rasa lan wirasa*, which translates to the study of both text and sentiment. The result is a unique soundscapes in which

the Qur'an is presented as both a divine message and a form of aesthetic culture, embodying the Yogyakarta principle of *harmoni lahir-batin* (outer-inner harmony).

In Surabaya, Indonesia's second-largest city and economic hub, Qur'anic recitation takes on a more public and prominent role. Historically recognized as centers of Islamic reform and commerce, neighborhoods like Ampel and Peneleh in Surabaya broadcast *tahlilan* over loudspeakers, blending domestic rituals with the urban ambiance. With over 2,000 registered mosques (small mosques) and lively *jamaah yasinan* groups, the city transforms religious sounds into an urban expression of devotion. Women's groups frequently lead recitations using microphones, prominently featuring female voices in public religious settings. This democratization of sound stands in contrast to the more introspective tone found in Kudus and Yogyakarta, with Qur'anic recitation serving as a means of social assertion and identity formation in the urban environment [62].

Together, these three cities demonstrate that the Qur'an's presence in Java is deeply linked to its auditory manifestation. The assertion that Javanese ritual conveys Islamic principles through concepts of harmony is vividly illustrated: Kudus intertwines lineage with orthodoxy, Yogyakarta merges intellect with spirituality, and Surabaya fuses tradition with urban energy. Each community develops its own 'acoustic theology,' a concept that means they express their beliefs not through simple explanations, but through shared rhythms and emotional connections, building connections and understanding among people [63].

The idea of *tafsīr lokal*—an interpretation conveyed through action—embodies a vibrant method of engaging with the Qur'ān within auditory and communal environments. In urban areas, people see the Qur'ān as more than just a text. Its importance comes to life through the practice of recitation, where voices join together, harmonize, and flow among those participating. This exchange creates a lived interpretation rooted in emotion, rhythm, and memory. Such performative involvement demonstrates that understanding the Qur'ān in Javanese Muslim communities goes beyond mere reading and contemplation, embracing active participation in which sound serves to build community connections and, importantly, encourage personal reflection, highlighting the individual impact of the practice [64].

These auditory practices are essential for building collective memory and social cohesion. The continuous recitation of Surah Yasin and Al-Fatihah during *tahlilan* strengthens the connection to ancestors, while the deliberate rhythm of *slametan* meals encapsulates the social principles of togetherness (guyub). In Yogyakarta, the measured pace of recitation mirrors the city's aesthetic of

equilibrium; in Surabaya, the heightened volume represents its ethos of public involvement. Each soundscape conveys a unique way of remembering—it is referred to as "incorporated practices" — where memory endures through physical repetition rather than through documented records [65].

The Qur'an in Javanese Islam serves as a sacred text and a source of moral order. Its verses resonate throughout daily life, intertwining spiritual devotion with social solidarity. In places like Kudus, Yogyakarta, and Surabaya, sound becomes a form of theology, and listening transforms into an act of faith. These soundscapes illustrate that Islam in Java is not only understood but also heard — a living rhythm through which divine words are continually re-inscribed in the fabric of communal existence.

Qur'anic Recitation in Urban and Digital Contexts

The recitation of the Qur'an in Indonesia, initially rooted mainly in the traditions of pesantren and mosques, has now entered a phase characterized by new forms of mediation and circulation. In urban and digital environments, recitation has evolved from an act of devotion to a cultural expression influenced by smartphones, livestreaming, and social media aesthetics. This essay investigates how local recitation practices adapt to technological advancements while addressing issues of authority, physical presence, and community engagement. In these contexts, the sacred voice of the Qur'an echoes within contemporary listening environments — from mosque loudspeakers to Instagram feeds and digital headphones.

In Yogyakarta, recitation practices combine traditional pesantren customs with modern digital delivery. At *Pondok Pesantren Al-Munawwir Krapyak*, public events for *sima'an* and *khatmil Qur'an* are frequently organized and documented through the pesantren's official channels. During the pandemic, these events included online programming. Meanwhile, at *UIN Sunan Kalijaga*, the student organization JQH (Jam'iyyah al-Qurra' wa al-Huffazh) *al-Mizan* provides formal training in tilāwah, along with tafsīr, tahfīẓ, calligraphy, and ṣalawāt. This indicates a continued focus on developing recitational styles and teaching methods on campus—additionally, various Yogyakarta-based initiatives stream tajwīd and reading sessions. For example, *Pos DAI* Yogyakarta offers live lessons called "*Yuk Ngaos*," and channels like *Ngaji Yuk*! provide accessible online tutorials for tajwīd. These efforts help extend Qur'anic learning beyond mosques and pesantren, making it available on phones and laptops.

Kudus, the city of Sunan Kudus and the historical heart of Javanese Islam, is a place where tradition and modernity coexist. Since 2021, the *khataman* Qur'an event at *Masjid Menara Kudus* during Ramadan has been live-streamed on Facebook, attracting a diverse audience, including expatriates from Jakarta and

Malaysia. The reciters, many of whom are alums of local *pesantren* like *Yanbu'ul Qur'an*, skillfully blend traditional qira'at with Javanese musical influences, a practice that honors and preserves local customs. Families come together to watch the live broadcast on television, turning it into a communal event that fosters a sense of cultural unity. This collective participation not only expands the reach of the Kudus recitation beyond the town's narrow streets but also preserves the local nuances of sound, language, and gesture, adding to its authenticity.

In Surabaya, *Masjid Al-Akbar*, the city's prominent mosque, has adopted digital innovation as a central aspect of its operations. The mosque has initiated training programs to enhance its staff's digital management skills, facilitating a more modern approach to religious practice [66]. Additionally, its educational units are focusing on providing students and young devotees with tools for digital Qur'ān reading and memorization. While traditional recitation sessions continue to be a vital part of worship, this development reflects a significant evolution in Qur'anic engagement, moving from purely physical interactions to the incorporation of digital platforms [67].

In three cities, three key themes emerge: hybridization, audience expansion, and negotiated authority [68]. The method of recitation, while still connected to Islamic orthodoxy, is experiencing hybridization due to the influence of digital media. This hybridization, driven by digital tools and platforms, merges traditional recitation practices and transforms the social interactions that accompany them. Authority, which was once centralized around local *ustadz* (religious teachers) and qaris (reciters), is now shifting towards online influencers and female reciters who gain considerable recognition through digital platforms. The audience, previously gathered physically in mosques, has become a dispersed yet emotionally connected community engaging through screens and comment sections. Digital mediation changes. The listening experience, from collective absorption to individual devotion, introduces new ways to build closeness and competition.

In Yogyakarta and Kudus, digital recitation [69] is a transformative tool, offering greater flexibility and allowing listeners to replay, slow down, or add notes to recordings. This not only creates a deeper connection with the sacred text but also revolutionizes the way it is engaged with. In Surabaya, this transformation is even more pronounced as commuters listen to Qur'ānic audio while driving, studying, or working, turning tilāwah (recitation) into a portable act of devotion. However, this accessibility also brings a feeling of ambivalence. Digital listening can create both a sense of closeness and isolation, mixing spiritual connection with physical distance. The experience of being together and alone, along with group memory and personal devotion, shapes much of today's

digital recitation. This reflects the complex feelings of Muslims as they balance their faith in a technology-driven world.

The soundscapes of these cities also highlight changes in sacred space. In Kudus, the mosque courtyard remains a spiritual center, but smartphones now amplify the collective voice. In Yogyakarta's boarding schools, live-streaming devices are discreetly placed alongside microphones during *musabaqah tilawatil Qur'an* competitions. In Surabaya, the urban mosque serves both as a studio and a stage, blending religious devotion with digital production. These complex spaces illustrate the idea of 'mediated sacrality' — the way the sacred extends beyond traditional architectural limits into networks, platforms, and data streams. This term refers to the transformation of conventional holy spaces and practices through digital media, a key aspect of the changes brought about by digital recitation. Female reciters whose digital appeal gains significant recognition. The audience, once physically gathered in mosques, has now become a dispersed yet emotionally connected community, engaging through screens and comment sections. Digital mediation changes the experience of listening — transforming from collective absorption to individual devotion — while also introducing new changes of intimacy and competition [70].

In Yogyakarta and Kudus, digital recitation makes listening to the Qur'an more flexible. People can replay, slow down, and add notes to recordings, which encourages deeper engagement with the text. In Surabaya, this flexibility is even clearer, as commuters listen to Qur'anic audio while driving, studying, or working. This turns recitation into a portable act of devotion.

However, this new way of engaging with the text creates a mix of closeness and loneliness, as well as shared spirituality and private reflection. It shows how people's faith is changing in a digital world. Rather than reducing participation, these changes allow more people to get involved. Women, young professionals, and individuals with disabilities—groups that often face challenges in traditional learning—now take part through digital platforms and Qur'an-learning apps. Online recitation competitions highlight the talents of female reciters. At the same time, digital archives help share and preserve regional recitation styles, like the unique Java–Hijaz blend from Kudus, with a global audience. Thus, digital recitation serves both to include more people and to protect Indonesia's rich devotional culture.

The experiences of Yogyakarta, Kudus, and Surabaya demonstrate that Qur'anic recitation in urban and digital Indonesia is not a departure from tradition, but rather a reconfiguration of its social and emotional expressions. The sacred voice continues to facilitate faith and community—now transmitted through cables, clouds, and screens. Thus, the contemporary soundscape reveals

not a loss of sanctity but a relocation of resonance: the Qur'an continues to resonate throughout the city, with its echoes traveling through bandwidth and breath.

Contextual Hermeneutics and Auditory Tafsir

In recent times, the methods for interpreting sacred texts in Indonesia have increasingly focused on what can be termed listening as a form of interpretation—an auditory engagement in which believers not only read but also hear and experience scripture within their social environments. This method merges two connected trends: the emergence of contextual hermeneutics, which situates the Qur'an within the realities of its readers, and the practice of auditory tafsir, which involves the collective, embodied experience of listening to recitation as a lively interpretation. These interrelated practices illustrate how sound, emotion, and context converge to shape modern understandings of revelation in Indonesia.

Contextual hermeneutics represents an essential change in how the Qur'an is studied in Indonesia. Traditional approaches that focused on transmitted narratives and textual authority have gradually evolved to incorporate the cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts that shape interpretation [71]. The Qur'an is now viewed not as a fixed text awaiting interpretation, but as an engaging voice that interacts with modern realities. In this framework, meaning arises through a continuous dialogue between the text, the audience, and their circumstances. The act of listening itself becomes a part of the hermeneutic process—each recitation prompts contemplation, reaction, and reinterpretation grounded in the listener's personal experiences.

Auditory tafsir in Indonesia marks the interpretive function of listening. Reciting the Qur'an often becomes a collective experience in which emotion, memory, and spirituality converge [72]. The auditory element creates a shared environment that encourages participants to reflect, even if they do not have access to scholarly explanations. For many Indonesian Muslims, who interact with the Qur'an mainly through its recitation rather than academic study, listening serves as a link between divine revelation and everyday experiences. Interpretation emerges within the flow of sound and silence, rather than solely from the written text.

In Yogyakarta, this style of auditory tafsir is highly ingrained in local mosques and community study groups. Following the recitation, participants express their impressions and insights influenced by their personal experiences. Audiences frequently articulate their understanding of the verses using concepts from Javanese culture, with terms such as *rasa* (inner feeling) and *semangat* (spirit) appearing often in their reflections. The atmosphere fosters dialogue and

emotion, and participants note that certain verses help them navigate challenges in family dynamics, education, and social cohesion. In Yogyakarta, listening is integral to daily life; the sacred word resonates within the ethical framework of existence, fostering personal spiritual growth.

In Kudus, auditory tafsir takes on a more formalized character, closely tied to pesantren traditions and communal worship. The recitations, combined with rhythmic dhikr and group prayers, create a multisensory experience that integrates voice, movement, and emotion. The audience actively engages rather than passively interprets through collective reflection. The Qur'an is felt as a vital companion, addressing the social and economic circumstances of the community — such as migration, labor, and agricultural cycles. Through shared listening, scripture reflects communal endurance and resilience, promoting a feeling of belonging and unity among participants.

Surabaya presents a contrasting yet complementary scenario. In its urban setting, auditory tafsir takes place in mixed environments that blend in-person gatherings with digital participation. Mosques, Islamic cafés, and online platforms facilitate livestreamed recitations where listeners interact in real time, share interpretations, and connect sacred sounds with the brisk pace of city life. The interpretive experience here is heavily influenced by technology, involving auditory engagement, reading translations on mobile devices, and discussing meanings online [73]. The Qur'an's voice travels through cables and Wi-Fi, connecting faith to the sensory stimulation of the modern city and highlighting the influence of modernity on religious practices.

Throughout these three locations, common characteristics can be identified. Listening is inherently a shared experience, and understanding arises from conversation and collective moments. Engaging with the Qur'an stimulates both the mind and the heart, merging cognition with devotion. Interpretation becomes localized and rooted, mirroring the challenges, values, and aspirations of particular communities. Nevertheless, it requires self-awareness: listeners recognize that their reactions are part of a wider interpretive tradition that must reconcile feelings with fidelity and emotional responses with exegesis.

The relationship between contextual interpretation and auditory tafsir in Indonesia showcases an evolving theology. In Yogyakarta, individuals come together in small groups to listen. In Kudus, they organize ceremonial events. In Surabaya, recitations are conducted online. Throughout these locations, understanding occurs through audio, engagement, and cultural expression. These experiences suggest that engaging with the Qur'an transcends mere worship; it also involves a process of learning — one that consistently transforms how revelation is perceived and interpreted. As Indonesian Muslim communities

navigate the complexities between local authenticity and textual authority, they exemplify a hermeneutic of listening that is both profoundly traditional and remarkably contemporary [74].

Conclusion

This research shows that Qur'anic soundscapes in Javanese Muslim traditions highlight how auditory and communal practices shape interpretation, reflecting an interaction among text, sound, and community. Studies conducted in Yogyakarta, Kudus, and Surabaya demonstrate that recitation extends beyond mere reading and embodies a performative interpretation where rhythm, emotion, and involvement combine to generate significance. Sound serves as a medium of interpretation, facilitating an experiential and embodied understanding of divine revelation.

The findings suggest that Javanese individuals engage with the Qur'an through auditory experiences rooted in collective memory and cultural awareness, forming contextual interpretations. The voices of kyais and santri are significant in preserving religious knowledge and imparting moral principles, transforming divine messages into ethical frameworks such as *rukun* and *unggah-ungguh*. This ongoing oral tradition is important because it helps people understand the Qur'an in connection with their daily social and spiritual lives. In contemporary times, especially in urban and digital settings, the practice of reciting the Qur'an continues to evolve through online platforms, streaming services, and digital media, thereby increasing accessibility and transforming sacred listening into a more adaptable and inclusive practice. Thus, the Qur'an retains its significance as both a spiritual and cultural entity in modern society.

This research confirms that listening acts as a means of interpretation. By resonating sound, individuals emotionally and ethically connect with divine messages. The experiences associated with the Qur'an continue to nurture devotion, identity, and harmony among Javanese Muslim communities. Furthermore, the research highlights that Qur'anic soundscapes provide insights into how interpretation unfolds through listening, emotion, and communal practice. However, the study acknowledges limitations, including the brief fieldwork duration, focus on three regions, and analysis of limited ritual contexts, which may not reflect the full diversity of Javanese or Indonesian Muslim communities. Future research may focus on more extensive ethnographic engagement, the examination of additional areas and ritual forms, and the exploration of the impacts of digital platforms on Qur'anic listening and interpretation.

Author Contributions

Lukis Alam: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Muhammad Maulana Mas'udi**: Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation. **Said Agil Husin Al Munawar**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation. **Hisam Sidqi:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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