Islamic Ecotheology and Contemporary Environmental Activism: A Living Qur'an Analysis of the Pandawara Group

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Abstract

*Existing studies on environmental activism and Green Islam in Indonesia largely focus on normative theology, institutional religious responses, or policy frameworks, while neglecting how Qur'anic ecological values are performatively embodied within youth-led digital movements. Moreover, scholarship on the Living Qur'an and Islamic ecotheology has insufficiently examined how theological legitimacy is constructed through digital virality and netizen participation, leaving a **gap** in understanding the transformation of ecological piety in the digital age. This article presents an in depth analysis of the Pandawara Group, a youth-led environmental movement, through the lenses of the Living Qur'an and Islamic Ecotheology. Employing a **qualitative method** with a netnographic design, this study analyzes viral content and netizen interactions to explore how theological values such as khalifah (vicegerency), amanah (trust), and the prohibition of fasad (corruption) are performatively expressed. The **findings** indicate that Pandawara practices what this study terms "Silent Theology" a form of functional reception where the Qur'an is embodied in social praxis rather than verbal preaching. Their actions serve as a "visual exegesis" of Surah Ar-Rum verse 41, creating a visual shock that forces the digital public to confront the reality of anthropogenic destruction. Furthermore, the study reveals a unique phenomenon where netizens act as grantors of theological legitimacy, framing secular environmental activism as a form of high value worship (ibadah). This study **contributes** to the discourse on Green Islam and Post-Islamism in Indonesia, demonstrating a significant shift from symbolic-ritualistic piety toward a substantive "Ecological Piety" driven by collective action and digital virality.*

Keywords: *Ecological Piety; Islamic Ecotheology; Living Qur'an; Pandawara Group.*

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Introduction

Indonesia currently stands at a critical environmental crossroads, trapped in a paradox as a megabiodiverse archipelagic nation while simultaneously facing acute ecological degradation. The phenomenon of river basin (DAS) pollution, the accumulation of marine plastic waste placing the country among the world's largest contributors to ocean debris and the increasing frequency of hydrometeorological disasters in urban areas are undeniable empirical realities [1]. Data from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry of the Republic of Indonesia (Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup dan Kehutanan Republik Indonesia) consistently indicate a rising volume of waste that remains optimally unmanaged [2],[3]. In Islamic cosmology, the faith practiced by the majority of Indonesia's population, this crisis is not a random anomaly but a clear manifestation of imbalance (mizan) resulting from human behavior, as signaled by the theological warning in Surah Ar Rum verse 41 regarding destruction on land and at sea caused by "human hands" a concept that has been widely discussed by contemporary Muslim scholars as a call for ecological responsibility[4]. However, a profound gap persists between the normativity of sacred texts that uphold environmental preservation and the sociological reality of Muslims who often neglect environmental ethics [5].

Over the last few decades, the discourse on Islamic ecotheology has become a prominent theme among scholars. Previous studies have generally focused on excavating normative texts or ecological exegesis such as the works of Quraish Shihab in Tafsir Al Misbah or Buya Hamka in Tafsir Al Azhar which emphasize the concepts of khalifah (vicegerent) and amanah (responsibility) in nature conservation [6],[7]. Other approaches focus on the role of formal religious institutions, such as environment-oriented boarding schools (eco pesantren) or fatwas issued by the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) concerning ecology [8]. On a broader global scale, the intersection of religion, ecology, and digital media has gained significant scholarly attention [9]. Foundational works on 'digital religion' highlight how online platforms facilitate new forms of digital piety [10]. Furthermore, recent international comparative studies on faith based environmentalism such as Koehrsen's 2021 comprehensive review of global Muslim ecological movements demonstrate that Islamic eco activism across various countries is increasingly utilizing public campaigns and digital spaces to transform traditional religious authority into concrete climate action [11]. However, within the specific context of Indonesia, these literatures have successfully established a solid theological foundation, they tend to be elitist, textual, and often confined to academic podiums or sermons that lack implementative binding force at the grassroots level [12]. These conventional approaches frequently fail to engage the practical dimensions of the younger

generation currently living within a digital ecosystem. Consequently, environmental theological narratives often stall as discourse without translating into massive and popular action.

Amidst the deadlock of formal religious narratives and the slow-paced technocratic solutions of the government, a new phenomenon of activism led by digital natives has emerged. The presence of the Pandawara Group, a youth collective from Bandung that mobilizes river cleanup actions through viral content on TikTok and Instagram, marks a significant paradigm shift in Indonesia's environmental social movements. Unlike traditional religious actors, Pandawara does not originate from textual authority or missionary institutions, but from pragmatic concerns over flooding [13]. However, what warrants academic scrutiny is how their actions secular in appearance are co-opted and interpreted by the public (netizens) as authentic practices of religious piety. This phenomenon indicates a functional and performative reception by the public toward Quranic values, manifested not through the speech of preachers, but through the bodies of youths struggling with mud and waste.

This research is fundamentally important for two primary reasons. First, it challenges the dominance of textual approaches in Quranic studies by offering a Living Qur'an perspective. Drawing on the reception theory framework of Ahmad Rafiq and scholars from UIN Sunan Kalijaga, the Qur'an does not only live in the intellectual mind (exegetical reception) or the beauty of recitation (aesthetic reception), but also in social-practical functions (functional reception) [14]. The Pandawara Group represents an anomaly where Islamic ecotheological values "live" and are effectively practiced by non-religious actors through social media virality or what can be termed as "Ecomedia." Second, this research fills a scholarly gap regarding how Generation Z translates environmental theology into direct action capable of triggering viral based policy, a dynamic that remains underexplored in classical Islamic studies and environmental sociology in Indonesia.

The primary contribution of this article is to broaden the horizon of social exegesis by demonstrating that digital activism can function as a form of tafsir bil hal (interpretation through action) that is more resonant in the contemporary era. While previous scholarship focused on how ecological verses were "interpreted" on paper, this research shows how such verses are "performed" in the field and "endorsed" in cyberspace [15]. Thus, this study is relevant not only to Islamic studies but also to the formulation of environmental communication strategies that are more adaptive to popular culture [16]. To systematically guide this investigation, the present study proposes the following research questions: (1) How is the digital environmental activism of the Pandawara Group functionally received and interpreted by the public as a living manifestation of

Quranic ecological values? (2) In what ways do these digitally mediated actions construct a new form of "ecological piety" through "embodied exegesis" (*tafsir bil hal*) outside traditional religious authority? (3) How does this viral-based digital activism bridge the gap between normative Islamic ecotheology and grassroots environmental action?

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a netnographic design (internet ethnography) to capture the digital footprints, interactions, and online community interpretations of the Pandawara Group's actions [17]. To ensure methodological transparency and academic rigor, the analytical procedure was systematically conducted through several stages.

First, regarding data selection and sampling, digital artifacts were purposively collected from social media platforms (specifically Instagram) where the Pandawara Group's environmental activism achieved massive virality. The primary data sample consisted of viral video content depicting mass cleanups and hundreds of top-tier netizen comments that explicitly or implicitly reflected religious sentiments, theological support, or moral reception.

Second, in the coding and categorization process, the collected digital data underwent a systematic thematic analysis [18]. The initial open coding involved labeling raw netizen comments and visual gestures. These codes were then mapped and categorized into specific themes aligned with the research focus, such as the genealogy of the movement, performative reception of texts, bureaucratic tensions, and the construction of ecological piety.

Third, for theoretical interpretation, the generated themes were analyzed using thick description techniques [19]. The empirical digital data were not merely narrated but critically interpreted through the analytical lenses of the Living Qur'an (specifically functional and performative reception) and Islamic ecotheology. This interpretation aimed to explain how digital actions translate into "embodied exegesis" or *tafsir bil hal*.

Finally, to strengthen data validation and ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, the researcher employed prolonged engagement in the digital space and source triangulation [16],[17]. Credibility was established by deeply observing and comparing the patterns of netizen interactions across multiple viral posts on the Pandawara Group's official Instagram account. This internal cross-checking process ensured that the identified theological sentiments and interpretations of the group's environmental campaigns were consistent and accurately reflected the broader digital community's reception.

Result and Discussion

Profile and Genealogy of the Pandawara Group Movement

The Pandawara Group is not an organization formed through a grand design or international donor funding. Rather, it was born organically from personal traumatic experiences. Its five members are a close knit circle of friends from South Bandung who were frequent victims of flooding [13]. In an interview with BenihBaik, they revealed that the initiative to clean rivers emerged after realizing that the floods submerging their homes were caused by waste accumulation in nearby waterways [22]. This organic, grassroots emergence strongly resonates with recent global trends in youth led environmentalism, where localized, everyday grievances often serve as more potent catalysts for collective action than formal institutional agendas [23].

Initially, their actions were local and reactive: clearing drains to prevent flooding. However, when these actions were documented and uploaded to TikTok in mid 2022, the public response was explosive. The first documentation uploaded in August 2022 served as a turning point that transformed a personal initiative into a public movement[13]. Such rapid mobilization underscores the transformative power of digital platforms, particularly among Generation Z, where short form video content functions not merely as entertainment, but as a crucial pedagogical tool for environmental civic engagement [24]. This genealogy is crucial in Living Qur'an analysis as it demonstrates that ecological consciousness does not always begin with religious dogmatism, but from empirical experience (*tajribah*) of witnessing and suffering from fasad (environmental corruption/disaster).

The name "Pandawara" contains profound philosophy. Derived from "Pandawa" (the five knights in the Mahabharata epic) and "*Wara*" (good news in Sundanese), the name symbolizes five youths bringing good tidings to the environment [13]. This choice of nomenclature, rooted in local culture, demonstrates an inclusive cultural strategy.

To ensure sustainability, the group developed a five-pillar framework that marks a transition from reactive cleaning to strategic conservation. Their operations span from river ecosystem restoration which involves deep cleaning sediment to large scale coastal rehabilitation, such as the massive mobilization at Sukaraja Beach. Beyond physical action, they employ digital based education and behavioral campaigns like 'One Day, One Trash Bag' to target the root cause of pollution: public mindset. Crucially, these initiatives are anchored in collaborative community engagement, ensuring that local residents maintain ownership of the restored areas [25]. This structure reflects a modern manifestation of *Da'wah Bil Hal*, where removing waste is operationalized as

nahy munkar (preventing harm), while environmental education functions as amar ma'ruf (promoting good) [26]. By operationalizing these theological concepts into tangible community cleanups, they exemplify a new wave of eco Islamic civic engagement that effectively bridges the gap between normative textual ethics and grassroots pragmatism [27].

Performative Reception: The Body as a Walking Exegetical Text

One of Pandawara's primary strengths is their ability to visualize abstract theological concepts into striking visual realities. In Islamic theology, fasad (corruption/mischief) is often discussed theoretically. However, Pandawara's videos displaying rivers covered in plastic waste from end to end, pitch black water, and odors that are palpably pungent serve as a tangible manifestation of Q.S. Ar-Rum: 41 [28].

When they record themselves wading into waist-high waste sludge, they are performing what this study conceptualizes through the analytical label of 'Embodied Exegesis' (*tafsir bil hal*). Defined as the physical manifestation of textual interpretation, this concept moves beyond verbal or written explanations (*tafsir bil qaul/bil qalam*). Instead, aligning with the theoretical framework of digital hermeneutics and the new face of Qur'anic reception on social media [29], theological meanings are translated directly into bodily actions and tangible fieldwork. They demonstrate to the public: "This is the fasad meant by God. This is the result of what our hands have wrought (*bima kasabat aydin nas*)." Without needing to verbally cite the verse, the audience immediately grasps the message of causality between human behavior and environmental destruction. This represents a high level performative reception, where textual messages are conveyed through the performance of reality [30].

The Pandawara Group practices what this study introduces as an analytical label termed 'Silent Theology'. Conceptually, this label is defined as a mode of religious activism where profound theological duties such as environmental stewardship are communicated entirely through concrete, secular-looking physical actions rather than explicit religious preaching or textual jargon. In their videos, religious sermons are rarely heard, and they appear in secular attire typical of youth culture. This phenomenon aligns with Asef Bayat's concept of 'Post-Islamism', as well as the sociological framework of 'everyday Islam' [31], where religious piety is no longer expressed solely through rigid symbols or state politics, but through civil engagement, practical environmental ethics, and secular-style activism [32]. Such a pragmatic shift in contemporary Muslim youth dynamics demonstrates how faith is seamlessly integrated into 'lived religion' and everyday civic duties, bypassing formal institutional boundaries [33]. This phenomenon parallels the rise of 'Green Muslims' and faith-based eco-activism

in Western and global contexts, where young Muslims similarly operationalize Islamic ethics into practical climate mitigation efforts outside traditional religious authorities [11]. Furthermore, as an analytical tool, both 'Silent Theology' and 'Embodied Exegesis' hold significant potential applicability beyond the Indonesian context, providing a useful framework to analyze similar youth driven, faith based ecological movements in global societies where digital activism transcends traditional religious boundaries.

In this context, the absence of verbal religious symbols actually strengthens the substantial message. In Living Qur'an studies, this signifies a shift from "Symbolic Islam" to "Substantive Islam" [34]. By prioritizing direct implementation over symbolic religious labeling, their actions illustrate the core of lived religion in Indonesia, which moves beyond the mere instrumentalization of religious texts toward substantive ecological justice [35]. Their action of cleaning rivers is the direct implementation of the hadith command of imathatul adza (removing harm from the path). By not explicitly labeling themselves as a religious movement, they successfully embrace a wider audience, including those who might be skeptical of conventional da'wah. They prove that Quranic values are universally applicable and inclusive.

Comparative Analysis of Exegesis and Field Action

Quraish Shihab's Tafsir Al-Misbah is highly relevant for dissecting the visual reality presented in Pandawara's content. Shihab emphasizes that the phrase 'bima kasabat aydin nas' (because of what the hands of men have earned) in Ar-Rum: 41 implies that environmental imbalance is strictly anthropogenic. This is empirically confirmed by Pandawara's footage, which frequently captures a stark irony: while the group struggles to remove tons of debris, nearby residents or passersby often display apathy (*ghaflah*) or continue to litter [36].

This visual paradox validates Shihab's interpretation that the root of the crisis is human behavior. The footage serves as a mirror, exposing the gap between the 'Muslihun' (reformers/Pandawara) who strive to restore the earth after its destruction (referencing Q.S. Al-A'raf: 56) and the passive or destructive actors who perpetuate the cycle of fasad. Through these raw visuals, Pandawara does not just clean the river; they expose the moral crisis of the society living around it [37].

Meanwhile, Hamka's Tafsir Al Azhar, which emphasizes the aspect of "preliminary punishment," is also relevant. The floods experienced by Pandawara personnel serve as a "minor punishment" in this world to awaken consciousness. And indeed, that consciousness has emerged. Hamka also underscores the importance of mercy toward nature. Pandawara's action to save

rivers can be viewed as a manifestation of Islam Rahmatan lil Alamin mercy not only for humans but for the river ecosystem [6].

Pandawara's actions are not always smooth. The cases of Loji Beach (Sukabumi) and Teluk Beach (Banten) provide interesting case studies regarding the clash between Living Qur'an activism and state bureaucracy.

Loji Beach (Sukabumi): Pandawara identified this beach as "The 4th Dirtiest Beach." Their initiative to clean it was initially rejected by village officials on the grounds of "defamation" (*pencemaran nama baik*). Here lies a clash of values: for Pandawara, allowing waste is a disgrace (*fasad*), whereas for officials, exposing the waste is the disgrace [38]. Pandawara employed a persuasive and humble approach (tawadhu), combined with public pressure (virality), to eventually force collaboration [39]. This reflects a smart *da'wah* strategy aligned with Q.S. An-Nahl: 125: firm in principle regarding environmental cleanliness (nahy munkar), but gentle and strategic in method (*bil hikmah*).

Teluk Beach (Banten): Here, the waste accumulation was dominated by kitchen residue and household plastics, indicating a failure of waste management systems at the upstream level. Pandawara's action triggered a response from the Governor of Banten to seek long-term solutions. This demonstrates that Pandawara's Living Qur'an activism possesses political impact: it functions as a moral check and balance mechanism against rulers who neglect the trust of environmental stewardship (*ri'ayah*) [2].

The Sociological Dimension: Public Response and the Construction of a New Piety

An analysis of netizen comments on Pandawara's account reveals an intriguing phenomenon: netizens act as grantors of theological legitimacy. Although Pandawara does not explicitly label their actions as ibadah (worship), netizens Recurrently categorize them as such.

The following table presents selected representative comments extracted using purposive sampling to illustrate the dominant theological themes found in the discussion:

Table 1. Digital Reception Patterns and Theological Meaning-Making among Netizens

Comment Category	Sample Netizen Phrases	Living Qur'an Perspective Analysis
Eschatological	"*Pandawara, the best sukses berkah dunia, akherat.*" "Pandawara, the best success, blessings of this world and the hereafter." (Instagram user @achdiyan)	The public perceives environmental activism not merely as a secular social activity, but as Ibadah Ghairu Mahdhah (general worship) that guarantees success in two realms (Fid-dunya wal Akhirah). The term "Berkah" indicates a belief that cleaning rivers invites divine increase in goodness.
Intergenerational Authority	"*Tolong untuk para lansia dan orang dewasa di edukasi!*" "Please educate the elderly and adults!" (Instagram user @yogasetiaone)	A unique shifting of authority where the public entrusts youth (Pandawara) to perform Da'wah (education) towards the older generation. This reverses the traditional sociological structure, positioning Pandawara as authoritative Muslihun (reformers) capable of correcting societal behavior regardless of age.
Prayer & Blessing (Barakah)	"*Sehat sehat buat kalian semua.*" "Good health to all of you." (Instagram user @arfiaaaann)	The comment section functions as a spiritual transaction space. Netizens reciprocate Pandawara's physical "gift" (clean environment) with a spiritual "gift" (prayers for health/longevity), creating a cycle of mutual support (Ta'awun) in the digital sphere.
Spiritual Zeal	"*Pengen ikut bersihin banggg*" "I want to help clean it up, bro." (Instagram user @nezawidia)	The visualization of waste triggers Ghirah (spiritual jealousy/zeal) among viewers. The reception transforms from passive consumption (watching) to active intention (Niyyah) to participate, embodying the Quranic command to compete in doing good deeds.

Source: *Processed by author from Pandawara Group's Instagram comments (2026).*

This data confirms that in the consciousness of the Indonesian Muslim public, the boundary between "social activism" and "*ibadah*" has blurred. This blurring is profoundly facilitated by digital platforms like Instagram, which have evolved into dynamic spaces for da'wah and the bottom-up negotiation of religious authority [40]. Environmental stewardship has been fully accepted as an integral part of piety, manifesting what this study introduces through the analytical label of 'Ecological Piety'. Conceptually, building upon the established framework of Islamic environmental ethics [4], this label is defined as a spiritual paradigm where concrete environmental action is elevated to the status of Ibadah *Ghairu Mahdhah* (general worship) that guarantees blessings in this world and the hereafter (*Fid-dunya wal Akhirah*). In this framework, as evidenced by the netizen comments, cleaning the environment is no longer seen as a mere secular civic duty, but as a spiritually rewarding act that invites divine grace (*Berkah*) and triggers spiritual zeal (*Ghirah*). Furthermore, as an analytical tool, 'Ecological Piety' holds significant potential applicability beyond the Indonesian context, offering a robust framework to analyze how global Muslim communities are increasingly redefining religious devotion through the prism of practical environmental sustainability. This potential is empirically grounded in the broader trajectory of global Islamic ethics, which demonstrates that modern Muslims are actively operationalizing universal Qur'anic principles into concrete, faith-based frameworks for planetary stewardship [41].

Despite its positive impact, this movement possesses vulnerabilities. The primary critique is the dependence on virality ("viral-based policy"). The government tends to act only when there is viral pressure. From the perspective of Islamic ethics, this indicates a lack of *Muraqabah* (sense of Divine surveillance) and *Mas'uliyyah* (public accountability) among officials, who act solely due to netizen surveillance rather than spiritual obligation [42]. Furthermore, there is a risk of "clicktivism" or slacktivism, where the public feels they have "contributed" simply by liking Pandawara videos without altering their own littering behavior [43]. This limitation is consistent with broader critiques of digital activism in Indonesia, where massive online engagement often creates an illusion of participation but fails to translate into sustained, systemic socio-political change without robust offline structural interventions [44]. True change (*taghyir*), according to the Qur'an (Q.S. Ar-Ra'd: 11), requires a transformation from within the self (soul/mentality), not merely cosmetic changes on the river surface. Sociologically, beach cleaning is merely a curative (downstream) solution that will remain futile if the upstream cause is not rectified [45]. Data from the National Waste Management Information System (SIPSN) confirms that households are the largest contributor to waste (56.72%) compared to other

sectors, proving that the real battle lies in domestic behavior, not just in river remediation [3].

Research Implications

To maximize the impact of these findings, this study outlines three structured implications:

1. Theoretical Implications: This study expands the scope of Living Qur'an research from the realm of traditional rituals to digital social movements. Furthermore, the conceptual labels introduced—Silent Theology, Embodied Exegesis, and Ecological Piety—offer a robust analytical framework applicable beyond Indonesia for observing global Muslim communities' responses to climate change.

2. Practical Implications (*Da'wah Strategies*): This phenomenon serves as a constructive critique of conventional da'wah. It proves that contemporary environmental da'wah must evolve to be highly visual, participatory, and action-oriented. Islamic institutions and educators can adopt Pandawara's communication model to foster spiritual zeal (ghirah) among the youth.

3. Policy Implications: To sustain this momentum, the government must shift from reactive "viral-based" responses to systematic, preventive waste management regulations. Policymakers should position youth communities like Pandawara as strategic partners. Simultaneously, educational stakeholders must formulate an applicative curriculum of "Ecological Jurisprudence" (*Fiqh al-Bi'ah*) to foster systemic societal change.

Research Limitations

Despite its significant contributions, this study acknowledges specific methodological and contextual limitations. Methodologically, the reliance on qualitative netnography restricts the primary data to digital interactions and observations, which may not fully capture the offline, long-term behavioral changes of the broader society. Contextually, the movement relies heavily on "viral-based activism," wherein government intervention often occurs only under the pressure of viral content. Furthermore, there is a distinct risk of "clicktivism" or slacktivism, where public participation may stall at social media engagement (likes and comments) without fundamentally altering domestic waste management behavior (fardhiyah). Therefore, future studies are recommended to employ quantitative or longitudinal approaches to measure the tangible, real-world impact of digital environmental da'wah on public behavior over time.

Conclusion

Based on the preceding analysis, this study concludes that the Pandawara Group represents a contemporary phenomenon that revitalizes the Living Qur'an within a digital ecological context. Their activism is not merely a social media trend, but a manifestation of a functional-performative reception that shifts the paradigm from "Symbolic Islam" to "Substantive Islam".

Answering the primary research objectives, this study identifies three key dimensions of this digital environmental da'wah. First, ideologically, they practice 'Silent Theology'; bypassing formal religious jargon to deliver inclusive, action-based messages that successfully resonate with a broad, often secular, Gen-Z audience. Second, methodologically, they demonstrate 'Embodied Exegesis' (tafsir bil hal). Rather than relying on pulpit rhetoric, they translate the Qur'anic warning of environmental corruption (fasad, as in Q.S. Ar-Rum: 41) into vivid visual language and the physical act of wading into polluted rivers to undertake restoration (islah). Third, sociologically, this movement has successfully constructed a public discourse of 'Ecological Piety', effectively elevating the secular act of environmental stewardship into a sacred duty (*Ibadah Ghairu Mahdhah*) that guarantees divine blessings (*Berkah*) in the eyes of the Indonesian Muslim public.

Author Contributions

Arkan Khanif: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Heriyanto**: Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation. **Yanyan Nurdin**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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