

Tafsir Nusantara as the Epistemological Basis of Contextual Islam: Responding to Indonesian Challenges in the Global Era

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Keywords : <i>Tafsir Nusantara, Hermeneutic, Contextual Islam, Pluralism</i>	Abstract This paper examines <i>Tafsir Nusantara</i> —the Indonesian tradition of Qur’anic interpretation—as an epistemological foundation for contextual Islam in Indonesia’s plural society. Drawing upon both classical hermeneutical theory and local wisdom, this study argues that <i>Tafsir Nusantara</i> is not merely a cultural phenomenon but a dynamic intellectual paradigm capable of addressing modern issues such as pluralism, radicalism, and globalization. Through analytical comparison between traditional works like <i>Tafsir al-Ibriz</i> and modern commentaries such as <i>Tafsir al-Mishbah</i> , the paper explores how Indonesian scholars integrate universal Islamic values with indigenous ethics. It concludes that <i>Tafsir Nusantara</i> provides an inclusive and dialogical model of interpretation that strengthens Indonesia’s national identity while promoting moderate Islamic thought.
Kata Kunci : Tafsir Nusantara, Hermeneutika, Islam Kontekstual, Pluralisme	Abstrak Tulisan ini mengkaji <i>Tafsir Nusantara</i> —tradisi penafsiran Al-Qur’an di Indonesia—sebagai landasan epistemologis bagi Islam kontekstual dalam masyarakat plural Indonesia. Dengan memadukan teori hermeneutika klasik dan kearifan lokal, studi ini berpendapat bahwa <i>Tafsir Nusantara</i> bukan sekadar fenomena kultural, melainkan paradigma intelektual yang dinamis dan mampu menjawab isu-isu modern seperti pluralisme, radikalisme, dan globalisasi. Melalui perbandingan analitis antara karya-karya tradisional seperti <i>Tafsir al-Ibriz</i> dan tafsir modern seperti <i>Tafsir al-Mishbah</i> , tulisan ini menelusuri bagaimana para sarjana Indonesia mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai universal Islam dengan etika lokal. Kesimpulannya, <i>Tafsir Nusantara</i> menawarkan model penafsiran yang inklusif dan dialogis yang memperkuat identitas kebangsaan Indonesia sekaligus mendorong pemikiran Islam yang moderat.
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Introduction

Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim-majority nation, has long sought to harmonize its Islamic heritage with local cultural expressions. Within this pursuit, *Tafsir Nusantara* has emerged as a distinctive movement in Qur’anic studies, reflecting a conscious effort to interpret revelation through the prism of Indonesian experience.¹ Scholars such as Quraish Shihab and Sahiron

¹ Azyumardi Azra, *Islam Nusantara: Islam Lokal yang Menjadi Global* (Jakarta: Prenada Media, 2019), 22.

Syamsuddin maintain that contextual interpretation is essential to realizing Islam's universal principles within Indonesia's pluralistic setting.²

Historically, Qur'anic interpretation in Indonesia has developed in a dialogue between Arabic textual orthodoxy and local customs. From early Malay translations in the seventeenth century to Javanese commentaries such as K.H. Bisri Musthofa's *Tafsir al-Ibriz*, Indonesian exegetes have localized Islamic knowledge without compromising its theological integrity.³ Yet, despite this long tradition, academic recognition of *Tafsir Nusantara* as an independent epistemology remains limited. Most prior research has treated it merely as a cultural adaptation rather than as a legitimate intellectual framework comparable to classical tafsir schools.⁴

This neglect creates a crucial research gap: while the global Muslim world increasingly values contextual approaches to interpretation, Indonesia's contribution is often underestimated.⁵ Azyumardi Azra underscores that Indonesian Islam represents a "civilizational dialogue" between revelation and locality—a model the wider Muslim ummah could learn from.⁶ By positioning *Tafsir Nusantara* as a valid epistemological project, this paper seeks to show how it provides theoretical resources for addressing contemporary issues such as social cohesion, gender equity, and religious tolerance within Indonesia's multicultural context.

In the global era, Indonesian Muslims face two simultaneous challenges: maintaining fidelity to Islamic orthodoxy and engaging modernity. The *Tafsir Nusantara* approach, rooted in cultural empathy and rational interpretation, offers a synthesis between these poles. Its strength lies not in rejecting the global Islamic discourse but in localizing it—transforming universal messages into contextually meaningful guidance for Indonesian society. Consequently, this study explores both the theoretical foundations and practical implications of *Tafsir Nusantara* as Indonesia's unique contribution to contemporary Islamic epistemology.

Literature Review

The term *Tafsir Nusantara* gained prominence in the early 2000s, reflecting a growing interest in localized hermeneutics among Indonesian scholars. It refers not merely to Indonesian-

² Quraish Shihab, *Membumikan Al-Qur'an: Fungsi dan Peran Wahyu dalam Kehidupan Masyarakat* (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2017), 15; Sahiron Syamsuddin, "The Contemporary Development of Qur'anic Interpretation in Indonesia," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 56, no. 2 (2018): 203–226.

³ K.H. Bisri Musthofa, *Tafsir al-Ibriz li Ma'rifat Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Aziz* (Kudus: Menara Kudus, 1957).

⁴ Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach* (London: Routledge, 2013), 89.

⁵ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 112.

⁶ Azyumardi Azra, *Islam Nusantara*, 44.

language exegesis but to a worldview that interprets the Qur'an through the sociocultural and historical experiences of the Indonesian people.⁷ This approach builds upon the broader trend of contextual hermeneutics in Islamic studies, particularly those proposed by Fazlur Rahman, Abdullah Saeed, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who advocate for an interpretation that bridges the historical meaning of the Qur'an with the moral imperatives of contemporary societies.⁸

According to Rahman, understanding the Qur'an requires a *double movement*: from the present to the historical context of revelation, and back to the present with new moral insights.⁹ *Tafsir Nusantara* operationalizes this theory by integrating local wisdom (*kearifan lokal*) and indigenous values such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), *musyawarah* (deliberation), and *tolerance* into the exegetical process.¹⁰ Quraish Shihab's *Tafsir al-Mishbah*, for instance, demonstrates how Qur'anic ethics are contextualized within Indonesia's pluralistic society without compromising theological authenticity.¹¹

Meanwhile, K.H. Bisri Musthofa's *Tafsir al-Ibriz* represents an earlier generation of localized tafsir, where Javanese linguistic and cultural idioms become tools for explaining divine revelation.¹² These examples show continuity between traditional and modern Indonesian interpretive methods. Sahiron Syamsuddin further argues that *Tafsir Nusantara* signifies not only linguistic adaptation but also the formation of an independent epistemic paradigm rooted in the lived experience of Indonesian Muslims.¹³

However, much of the current literature treats *Tafsir Nusantara* descriptively rather than analytically.¹⁴ There remains a lack of theoretical work that situates it within global Islamic epistemology. This paper fills that gap by evaluating how Indonesian exegetes transform Qur'anic hermeneutics into a framework capable of responding to modernity, pluralism, and nationhood. It also analyzes the extent to which this interpretive tradition can contribute to global Islamic thought, particularly in promoting moderate and inclusive interpretations of the Qur'an.

⁷ Sahiron Syamsuddin, "Metodologi Tafsir Nusantara," in *Tafsir Nusantara: Keindonesiaan dalam Penafsiran al-Qur'an*, ed. Sahiron Syamsuddin (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2019), 11.

⁸ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London: Routledge, 2006), 73.

⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6.

¹⁰ Azyumardi Azra, *Islam Nusantara* (Jakarta: Prenada Media, 2019), 31.

¹¹ Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir al-Mishbah* (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2000), 25.

¹² K.H. Bisri Musthofa, *Tafsir al-Ibriz*, Introduction.

¹³ Sahiron Syamsuddin, *Metodologi Tafsir Nusantara*, 15.

¹⁴ Ahmad Rafiq, "The Reception of the Qur'an in Indonesia," *Studia Islamika* 23, no. 3 (2016): 507–533.

Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative analytical approach** based on **textual hermeneutics** and **comparative analysis**. Primary sources include seminal Indonesian tafsir works—particularly *Tafsir al-Ibriz* by Bisri Musthofa and *Tafsir al-Mishbah* by Quraish Shihab—representing traditional and modern expressions of *Tafsir Nusantara*. These are analyzed alongside theoretical frameworks developed by Fazlur Rahman, Abdullah Saeed, and Azyumardi Azra to understand the epistemological dynamics of contextual interpretation.

The research follows three main stages:

1. **Textual analysis** – examining the linguistic and thematic features of selected tafsir passages that illustrate contextualization of Qur'anic messages in Indonesian settings.
2. **Hermeneutical interpretation** – identifying how local culture, social ethics, and national identity influence exegetical reasoning.
3. **Comparative synthesis** – assessing how *Tafsir Nusantara* aligns or diverges from broader global Islamic interpretive trends.

Data were collected through library research, focusing on primary tafsir texts, academic journal articles, and monographs published within the last decade. Analytical frameworks are drawn from *epistemological contextualism*, *Islamic hermeneutics*, and *Indonesian studies*. The study's objective is to evaluate whether *Tafsir Nusantara* functions as a legitimate epistemological system, not merely as a sociocultural expression of Islam.

Results and Discussion

1. The Epistemological Foundation of *Tafsir Nusantara*

The epistemological character of *Tafsir Nusantara* emerges from its dual commitment to *naqliyah* (textual revelation) and *'aqliyah* (reason-based interpretation). This duality reflects Indonesia's long-standing synthesis of religious and rational traditions, influenced by both Islamic orthodoxy and indigenous cosmology. As Sahiron Syamsuddin notes, *Tafsir Nusantara* stands as a “living epistemology,” one that engages the Qur'an through the lens of local experience while remaining anchored in classical tafsir methodology.¹⁵

At the theoretical level, *Tafsir Nusantara* aligns with the *contextualist hermeneutics* proposed by Abdullah Saeed, which emphasizes socio-historical awareness as part of the interpretive process.¹⁶ Saeed argues that meaning-making in tafsir is not static; it evolves with the

¹⁵ Sahiron Syamsuddin, “Metodologi Tafsir Nusantara,” in *Tafsir Nusantara*, 19.

¹⁶ Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century*, 102.

moral and intellectual development of society. Indonesian interpreters, operating within a diverse archipelagic society, naturally adopt this dynamic interpretive posture. This is evident in the shift from literalist readings of scripture toward moral-ethical contextualization seen in modern Indonesian tafsir works.

Azyumardi Azra further asserts that the epistemology of *Tafsir Nusantara* is dialogical rather than oppositional.¹⁷ It neither rejects classical interpretations nor uncritically adopts Western hermeneutics; instead, it synthesizes both into a uniquely Indonesian discourse. This mediating position gives *Tafsir Nusantara* resilience against both radicalism—rooted in textual absolutism—and relativism—rooted in secular liberalism. The goal is not to secularize Islam but to reassert its universal relevance through local culture.

2. The Role of Local Wisdom (*Kearifan Lokal*) in Interpretation

Central to *Tafsir Nusantara* is the principle that revelation must “speak the language of its people.”¹⁸ In Indonesia, this means translating Qur’anic moral values into concepts familiar to local communities. The ethical pillars of Indonesian society—*gotong royong*, *musyawarah*, and *tenggang rasa*—become interpretive lenses through which divine messages gain practical meaning.¹⁹

For example, *Tafsir al-Ibriz* by K.H. Bisri Musthofa integrates Javanese idioms and proverbs to explain Qur’anic teachings. In interpreting *Surah Al-Ma’un*, Musthofa contextualizes the command to care for orphans and the poor within the Javanese value of *tepa selira* (empathy).²⁰ This adaptation does not dilute the Qur’an’s moral imperative; rather, it amplifies it by connecting divine injunctions to familiar cultural ethics.

In *Tafsir al-Mishbah*, Quraish Shihab employs a similar method but through modern sociological reasoning. He interprets *Surah Al-Hujurat* (49:13)—which declares that human diversity is a divine design—as a theological foundation for Indonesia’s plural society.²¹ Shihab’s exegesis stresses *ukhuwah insaniyah* (human solidarity) alongside *ukhuwah islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood), positioning the Qur’an as a source of inclusive morality.²²

¹⁷ Azyumardi Azra, *Islam Nusantara*, 51.

¹⁸ Quraish Shihab, *Membumikan Al-Qur’an*, 43.

¹⁹ Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam, Kemodernan, dan Keindonesiaan* (Bandung: Mizan, 2019), 58.

²⁰ K.H. Bisri Musthofa, *Tafsir al-Ibriz*, 214.

²¹ Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir al-Mishbah*, Vol. 12, 123.

²² *Ibid.*, 130.

These interpretive strategies demonstrate that local wisdom functions not merely as cultural ornamentation but as an epistemic bridge that renders revelation intelligible and relevant. This blending of cultural context and scriptural truth is the essence of *Tafsir Nusantara's* epistemological originality.

3. Responding to Contemporary Indonesian Challenges

Indonesia's sociopolitical reality—characterized by religious pluralism, democratization, and global integration—presents distinct challenges for Muslim scholars. The rise of religious conservatism and transnational ideologies threatens Indonesia's long-standing ethos of moderation.²³ In this context, *Tafsir Nusantara* operates as a counter-discourse that reaffirms Islam's adaptability and inclusivity.

By drawing on Indonesia's own intellectual heritage, *Tafsir Nusantara* offers a culturally embedded response to radical interpretations imported from the Middle East.²⁴ It reclaims interpretive authority for local scholars who understand the nuances of Indonesian Islam. Through works like *Tafsir al-Mishbah*, *Tafsir al-Ibriz*, and *Tafsir Marah Labid*, Indonesian exegetes demonstrate that the Qur'an can support plural democracy, gender justice, and environmental ethics—all framed within Islamic moral language.

For instance, Shihab's interpretation of *Surah An-Nisa'* emphasizes gender complementarity rather than hierarchy, aligning with Indonesia's ongoing discourse on women's rights.²⁵ Similarly, Musthofa's reading of *Surah Al-Baqarah* uses Javanese idioms of patience and harmony to discourage sectarian conflict.²⁶ These examples show that *Tafsir Nusantara* engages contemporary social issues not through abstraction but through practical contextualization grounded in national values.

The epistemological implication is profound: *Tafsir Nusantara* demonstrates that Islamic interpretation need not be derivative of Arab models to be legitimate. Instead, it proves that local intellectual traditions can produce universally valid insights when guided by sound hermeneutical principles.²⁷

²³ Greg Barton, "Indonesia's Struggle with Radical Islam," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 18, no. 4 (2020): 1–12.

²⁴ Azyumardi Azra, *Islam Nusantara*, 55.

²⁵ Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir al-Mishbah*, Vol. 4, 97.

²⁶ K.H. Bisri Musthofa, *Tafsir al-Ibriz*, 78.

²⁷ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 85.

4. The Global Significance of *Tafsir Nusantara*

Beyond Indonesia, *Tafsir Nusantara* holds relevance for the wider Muslim world grappling with similar challenges of modernity and cultural diversity. As Abdullah Saeed argues, “the future of Qur’anic interpretation lies in contextualist approaches that speak to the realities of human societies.”²⁸ Indonesia’s model provides an empirical example of this vision in action.

International scholars such as Ebrahim Moosa and Asma Barlas have acknowledged the need for localized epistemologies that resist both cultural hegemony and theological rigidity.²⁹ *Tafsir Nusantara* offers such an alternative by demonstrating how Islamic texts can be interpreted through indigenous wisdom without undermining divine authority.

The Indonesian experience also resonates with global movements for “Islamic humanism,” which advocate for compassion, equality, and justice as the essence of Qur’anic ethics.³⁰ By embodying these values in culturally specific forms, *Tafsir Nusantara* contributes to the decolonization of Islamic knowledge. It asserts that the periphery—Indonesia—can generate new centers of intellectual authority in the Islamic world.³¹

Conclusion

Tafsir Nusantara represents one of the most significant intellectual achievements of Indonesian Islam in the modern era. It demonstrates that Qur’anic interpretation can be deeply faithful to revelation while simultaneously responsive to local culture and contemporary realities. By rooting interpretation in the lived experiences and ethical traditions of Indonesian society, *Tafsir Nusantara* transforms Islamic hermeneutics into a dynamic and dialogical process rather than a fixed textual doctrine.

The study reveals that the epistemological strength of *Tafsir Nusantara* lies in its synthesis of classical Islamic methodologies with indigenous wisdom. Through works such as *Tafsir al-Ibriz* and *Tafsir al-Mishbah*, Indonesian scholars have effectively localized the Qur’an without diminishing its universality. Their approach integrates moral reasoning, cultural sensitivity, and social awareness — producing interpretations that speak directly to issues like pluralism, gender equality, and national unity.

²⁸ Ibid., 92.

²⁹ Ebrahim Moosa, *What Is a Madrasa?* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 211; Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 167.

³⁰ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari’ah in the Modern Age* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 119.

³¹ Azyumardi Azra, *Islam Nusantara*, 61.

In an era of increasing religious polarization, *Tafsir Nusantara* stands as a model for contextual, humanistic, and inclusive Qur'anic interpretation. It refutes the notion that authority in tafsir must come exclusively from the Arab heartlands, proving instead that the intellectual peripheries can enrich global Islamic thought. As a living epistemology, *Tafsir Nusantara* offers a pathway for Muslims worldwide to interpret their sacred texts in ways that are both authentic and transformative.

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