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ADVANCES IN SOCIAL HUMANITIES RESEARCH

Fiqh and Sufism in the Interpretation of the Qur'an: A Comparative Study of Shaykh Muhammad Arsyad Al-Banjari and Shaykh Abdus Samad Al-Falimbani

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Abstract

The history of Qur'anic interpretation in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago has generally been documented through works explicitly classified as tafsir, such as Tarjuman al-Mustafid and Marah Labid. This approach has often overlooked exegetical practices embedded in works outside the conventional tafsir genre. During the eighteenth century, many scholars in the archipelago incorporated Qur'anic interpretation into works of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), theological treatises on divine unity (tawhid), and spiritual guides on the Sufi path (suluk). Addressing this scholarly gap, this study compared Shaykh Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjari and Shaykh Abdus Samad al-Falimbani, two scholars associated with the same scholarly networks in the Haramayn and the Sammaniyyah Sufi tradition who nevertheless produced works in distinct literary genres. The study examined how literary genre influenced each scholar's approach to interpreting Qur'anic verses. Drawing on five primary sources—Sabil al-Muhtadin, Tuhfat al-Raghibin, and Kanz al-Ma'rifah by al-Banjari, and Hidayat al-Salikin and Siyar al-Salikin by al-Falimbani—the research employed a genre-neutral analytical framework comprising four dimensions: mode of textual presence, rhetorical function, explanatory technique, and interpretive authority. The findings indicated that al-Banjari primarily employed Qur'anic verses as foundations for legal reasoning, interpreting them in relation to practical rulings within the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence. In contrast, al-Falimbani approached Qur'anic verses as guides to spiritual development, emphasizing successive stages of spiritual refinement and deeper dimensions of inner experience. The study concluded that literary genre served as an important methodological factor shaping Qur'anic interpretation, complementing scholarly perspectives emphasizing the influence of ulama networks. It further proposed the concept of embedded exegesis as an analytical category for understanding Qur'anic interpretation incorporated into works belonging to other intellectual and literary genres.

INTRODUCTION

The history of Qur'anic interpretation in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago has generally been documented through works explicitly classified as tafsir. Tarjumān al-Mustafīd by Abd

al-Ra'uf al-Sinkili, Marāḥ Labīd by Nawawi al-Bantani, and various twentieth-century exegetical works have become major reference points in scholarly discussions. Although this approach is understandable from a practical perspective, it has methodological implications that have rarely been critically examined, particularly the marginalization of exegetical practices embedded in works outside the conventional tafsir genre. During the eighteenth century, many scholars in the archipelago incorporated their interpretations of the Qur'an into works of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), theological treatises on divine unity (tawḥīd), and guides to Sufi spiritual practice (sulūk), rather than confining their exegetical activities to independent tafsir works (Abdullah, 2018; Azra, 2013; Dahlan, 2011; Fathurahman, 2016; Imawan, 2018).

Two prominent scholars who illustrate this issue are Shaykh Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjari and Shaykh Abdus Samad al-Falimbani. Both lived during overlapping historical periods, pursued extensive religious education in the Ḥaramayn (Mecca and Medina), and were associated with the spiritual lineage of the Sammaniyyah Sufi order, centered on Shaykh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim al-Sammani in Medina. Azyumardi Azra identified both scholars as members of an intellectual network that promoted religious reform and the integration of Islamic law (sharīʿah) and Sufism in the Malay-Indonesian region. Their intellectual proximity extended beyond geographical connections, encompassing shared scholarly influences, overlapping textual references, and similar orientations toward religious reform (Rahayu, 2022; Rahmi et al., 2022; Saefullah & Permana, 2019; Yusuf, 2023; Zulkifli, 2009).

Despite these shared intellectual foundations, the two scholars pursued distinct scholarly trajectories. Al-Banjari returned to Banjarmasin and composed Sabīl al-Muhtadīn li al-Tafaqquh fī Amr al-Dīn, a Malay-language treatise on Islamic jurisprudence within the Shafi'i school (madhhab), reportedly written at the request of Sultan Tahmidullah. He also authored Tuḥfat al-Rāghibīn, which addressed Islamic theology, and Kanz al-Maʿrifah, which focused on Sufi spiritual practices. In contrast, al-Falimbani remained in the Middle East for a longer period and produced Hidāyat al-Sālikīn and Siyar al-Sālikīn ilā ʿIbādat Rabb al-ʿĀlamīn, two influential works on Sufism that have served as important references for practitioners of sulūk in the Malay world (al-Banjari, n.d.; al-Falimbani, n.d., 1901).

These differences in literary genre may help explain why the two scholars have rarely been examined comparatively (Maulidiah et al., n.d.). Scholarship on al-Banjari has predominantly emphasized Islamic jurisprudence, intellectual history, and local religious traditions, whereas studies of al-Falimbani have generally focused on Sufism, scholarly networks, and the authentication and tracing of hadith sources (takhrīj al-ḥadīth) (Setiawan et al., 2020). Within these scholarly approaches, the Qur'anic verses cited by both figures have often been treated primarily as supporting evidence for their arguments rather than as independent objects of exegetical investigation. Consequently, an important research gap remains: despite their shared intellectual networks and substantial influence on Islamic scholarship in the archipelago, their approaches to interpreting and employing Qur'anic verses have received limited systematic comparative attention (Munandar, 2020).

This study addressed this gap by examining a structural question rather than attempting to determine which scholar employed a more systematic exegetical method. Specifically, it investigated whether differences in literary genre influenced the ways in which two scholars

from closely related intellectual networks interpreted and employed Qur'anic verses. It also examined how these differences manifested in their respective works and what implications they might have for reconstructing the history of Qur'anic interpretation in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago.

Based on these considerations, the study formulated three research questions. First, how were Qur'anic verses incorporated and employed in al-Banjari's works on Islamic jurisprudence and theology? Second, how were Qur'anic verses incorporated and employed in al-Falimbani's works on Sufism? Third, what did a comparison of these two scholars reveal about the relationship between literary genre and exegetical methodology among eighteenth-century Muslim scholars in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago?

The novelty of this study lies in three principal contributions. First, regarding its comparative focus, the study examined al-Banjari and al-Falimbani through their approaches to interpreting and employing Qur'anic verses, a perspective that has received limited attention in the literature reviewed, where existing comparisons have generally emphasized Sufism or intellectual networks. Second, regarding its unit of analysis, the study focused on the treatment of individual Qur'anic verses rather than exclusively examining works formally classified as tafsir. This approach enabled the methodological investigation of exegetical practices embedded in other literary genres. Third, at the conceptual level, the study proposed the term embedded exegesis to describe interpretive practices incorporated into works whose primary purposes extend beyond Qur'anic commentary. This analytical category offers a broader framework for examining the relationship between literary genre and Qur'anic interpretation, with potential applications to the wider Malay-Jawi Islamic scholarly corpus.

METHOD

This study examined five primary texts: Sabīl al-Muhtadīn (two volumes), Tuḥfat al-Rāghibīn, and Kanz al-Maʿrifah by al-Banjari, and Hidāyat al-Sālikīn and Siyar al-Sālikīn by al-Falimbani. For Sabīl al-Muhtadīn, the study referred to a printed edition identified in previous philological research as closely corresponding to manuscript Cod. Or. 7280 at Leiden University and manuscript 2318 at King Saud University, both of which were reported to resemble the edition published by al-Maṭbaʿah al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī in Cairo. The textual tradition of Siyar al-Sālikīn was also considered, particularly the manuscript collection at the National Library of Malaysia, which reportedly contained 48 copies, including nine complete and 39 incomplete manuscripts.

To ensure methodological consistency when comparing works from different literary genres, the study employed a genre-neutral analytical framework rather than conventional classifications of Qur'anic exegesis, such as ijmālī, muqāran, and mawḍūʿī. The framework comprised four analytical dimensions: (1) mode of textual presence, which examined whether Qur'anic verses were quoted fully, quoted partially, cited by reference, or paraphrased; (2) rhetorical function, which identified their roles as legal evidence, introductory statements, spiritual encouragement, or subjects of interpretation; (3) explanatory technique, which examined the use of narrative explanation, linguistic analysis, principles of uṣūl al-fiqh, spiritual interpretation, or comparisons of scholarly opinions; and (4) interpretive authority, which identified references to earlier exegetes, jurists, Sufi scholars, and hadith traditions.

These dimensions were applied consistently to the selected texts to facilitate a systematic comparison of exegetical practices across jurisprudential and Sufi literary genres.

The study had three methodological limitations. First, the primary texts originated from the Jawi manuscript tradition, and textual interpretation depended on the accuracy of the consulted editions and transliterations, as variations among manuscript copies could affect textual readings (Fathurrahman, 2016, pp. 12–15). Second, the analysis did not encompass every Qur'anic verse cited in the five works but focused on systematically selected sections, including introductory chapters, discussions of worship, and doctrinal passages. Third, the reported distribution of previous research themes was based on the author's literature search rather than a formal bibliometric analysis; therefore, these figures were treated as indicative estimates rather than comprehensive bibliometric findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Biographical Convergence, Genre Divergence

The starting point of this analysis is an anomaly that is rarely questioned. If the theory of the great scholars network is true that the similarity of teachers and the similarity of intellectual sources produce the same scientific orientation, then al-Banjari and al-Falimbani should produce similar works. In fact, this is not the case. Both produce a completely different corpus in form, target readership, and way of argument.

Table 1 summarizes these convergences and divergences.

Table 1. Biographical Convergence and Divergence of Genres of al-Banjari and al-Falimbani

Aspects	Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjari	Abdus samad al-Falimbani
Period of life	1710-1812 AD	± 1704-1789 AD
Region of Origin	Martapura, Banjar Sultanate	Palembang, Plembang Sultanate
Study center	Makkah and Medina	Makkah and Medina
Affiliation of the order	Sammaniyah	Sammaniyah
Writing language	Malay with Jawi script	Malay with Jawi script
Main works	Sabîl al-Muhtadîn, Tuhfat al-Rāgibīn, Kanz al-Ma'rifah	Hidayat al-Sālikīn, Sayrh al-Sālikīn
Dominan genus	Fiqh and tauhid	Sufism and Sufism
Target readers	The general public and the sultanate apparatus	Practice of suluk and students of the tarekat

This table shows that of the nine aspects compared, six showed convergence and only three were divergent and all three divergences all boiled down to one thing, the choice of genre. The similarity of the writing language is even parallel, their target readers do not master Arabic, for parallel reasons. Their target readers are what is vernacular spiritual experience.

This anomaly is the entrance to the research. If the network explains the convergence, then something else must explain the divergence. The working hypothesis of this article is that it is the genre that serves as the explanatory variable, and that its influence penetrates to the

most basic layer of the scholarly work of the two figures, namely the way they treat the verses of the Qur'an.

Map of Previous Studies: Why the Dimension of Interpretation Is Late

Before going into the analysis of the text, it is necessary to explain why the dimension of interpretation of the two figures is almost untouched. When a book is labeled "book of fiqh". Research comes with a question of fiqh, when it is labeled "the book of Sufism", the research comes with the question of Sufism. The verses present in it are then read as an argumentative device of the author, not as a trace of interpretation. In other words, this gap is not caused by a scarcity of data, but by the dominant reading framework.

The existing studies have actually touched on many times but this problem does not enter into it. An intertextual study of the thought of zakat al-Banjari, for example, shows that his opinion on the use of zakat for productive purposes is the result of ijtihad, not just oppression. Such ijtihad is impossible to do without a process of re-reading the reference. However, the study stops at the conclusion of the fiqh and does not proceed to the question of how the recitation of the verse works. The same thing happened in the study of al-Falimbani, the takhrij research found a number of hadiths in Hidāyat al-Sālikīn whose status is unknown. A finding that supposedly indicates a certain methodological orientation, the priority of didactic fungsu over the verification of sanad but is not developed into an analysis of how to treat the source of revelation in general.

Treatment of Verses in a-Banjari: Verses as Legal Foothold

Sabîl al-Muhtadîn consists of two volumes and is entirely arranged within the framework of the Shafi'i madhhab, with the first volume opening with a purifying chapter and ending with a discussion of makruh matters. The reading of this book shows a coherent and predictable pole. The verses of the Qur'an appear mainly in the opening position of the discussion of a chapter of law, serving as the basis that validates all subsequent descriptions. After the verse is recited, the direction of explanation moves narrowly, from the text of the verse to the principle of usul, from the principle of proposal to the opinion of the Shafi'i madhhab, and ends in practical provisions that can be immediately put into practice.

This narrowing pattern is most clearly seen in the discussion of zakat. When discussing the group of zakat recipients, al-Banjari is based on the provisions of the eight asnaf as stipulated in Surah At-Taubah verse 60. What is interesting is not the quote, but what he did afterwards. Al-Banjari does not stop at the lexical explanation of the eight categories, but draws them into the context of the Banjar community and comes to the conclusion that zakat funds can be used for productive expansion. Here something methodologically important happens, the verse serves as a framework whose boundaries are reinterpreted according to the needs of the context, rather than as a closed list that only needs to be translated.

The same pattern can be seen in other chapters of worship. In the discussion of purification, the main reference verse is Surah Al-Ma'idah verse 6 which contains the provisions of ablution and tayamum. Al-Banjari's description of this verse is not directed at the exploration of linguistic meaning, but directly at the details of the harmony, conditions, and things that cancel. The verse becomes a kind of entrance that is immediately abandoned as soon as the discussion of the law begins.

The most distinctive characteristic of the treatment of verse in al-Banjari actually appears when al-Banjari is confronted with local customs. A study of Sabîl al-Muhtadîn shows that in the face of practices such as burial with tabala and the construction of latrines over rivers, practices that in Middle Eastern jurisprudence books tend to be considered problematic, al-Banjari chose the path of negotiation, not rejection. To get there, al-Banjari had to interpret the scope of the provisions of the Shari'ah more loosely than that available in his Arabic references. This is the work of tafsir in the opposite sense, even though it is done in a book that does not call itself tafsir.

As for Kanz al-Ma'rifah, which is in the genre of tarekat, the character of the treatment of the verses changes. A study of this book shows that al-Banjari uses a form of dhikr recitation that is not as far as the variants circulating among other Sammaniyahs, and is closer to the practice that applies in South Kalimantan. This difference indicates that when the genre shifted, al-Banjari also shifted the way of arguing. This finding is important because it shows that the determining variable is not the intellectual personality of the author alone, but the demands of the genre he is writing about.

The Treatment of Verse in al-Falimbani: Verses as a Marker of Spiritual Stages

In al-Falimbani, the direction of explanation moves in the opposite direction. The verse is not followed to be narrowed down to a definite, but rather opened up into a layer of meaning that corresponds to the stages of the reader's spiritual journey. The Syar al-Sālikīn and the Hidāyat al-Sālikīn are arranged according to the structure of the maqāmāt, and the verses present in them are placed as markers at each stage.

This character is rooted in al-Falimbani's own intellectual position. A comparative study of Nusantara Sufism places it on the middle road between al-Ghazālī and Ibn 'Arabī, with the result being a systematization of Sufism that stands as a separate building. The methodological consequences are immediately felt in the treatment of the verse, a verse that in the reading of fiqh will produce one provision, in the reading of al-Falimbani it can produce several layers at once the layer of deeds born, the layer of mental attitude, and the layer of makrifat experience.

This difference in orientation can also be read from the way al-Falimbani treats supporting sources. The finding that a number of hadiths in his works are not verified in their status It is not entirely appropriate to read as a methodological weakness when measured by the standards of hadith science. In the framework of the sufuk genre, the function of quotation is not to establish binding obligations, but to move the reader towards a certain practice. The applicable standard is the standard of didactic effectiveness, not the standard of legal validity. Therefore, judging al-Falimbani with a benchmark designed for the book of fiqh will result in a misreading of the target.

It should be noted that al-Falimbani did not always stand on the inner realm. The above study of Nasīhat al-Muslimīn shows that he also wrote about jihad in a much more practical and political tone, This means that al-Falimbani is able to change registers when the genre of his writing changes. This fact strengthens the argument of this article, which determines the way in which the verse is treated is not the tendency of the writer's probadi, but the demands of the genre of the text that is being compiled.

One thing that distinguishes al-Falimbani technically is the density of his quotations. A review of the manuscript of Sayr al-Sālikīn shows that this book was compiled as a development of the framework of Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Din with considerable additions and adjustments. Consequently, most of the verses present are already present in Ihyā', so what needs to be analyzed is not just what verses are quoted, but what changes from al-Ghazālī's explanation when it is transferred to the Malay language and the context of the Nusantara reader. It is at this point that al-Falimbani's interpretation work actually takes place.

Comparative Analysis

By applying four variables of the analysis framework to the corpus, a comparison matrix was obtained as presented in Table 2.

Table 2, Comparative Matrix Treatment of Qur'an verses

Variabel	Al-Banjari (genre of fiqh-tauhid)	Al-Falimbani (genre tasawuf)
Mode of attendance	Short quotations in the opening position of the chapter, often only the legally relevant part of the verse	Quotations are scattered throughout the body of the text, present repeatedly at different stages
Rhetorical function	Evidence of the Establishment and Validator of Legal Provisions	A marker of spiritual stages and a driver of charitable motivation
Explanatory directions	Narrowing, from verse to practical provision	Opening up from verse to the layers of inner experience
Explanatory techniques	Rules of fiqh proposal, comparison, madhhab income, local customary considerations	Tiered explanations, experiential analogies, coordination with maqāmāt
Reference authority	Fukaha madhhab Shafi'i, an earlier Malay book of jurisprudence	Al-Ghazālī as the main framework, Sufi figure, hadith of fadā'il
Validity standards	Legal provisions and consistency of madhhab	Didactic effectiveness and conformity with the stages of salik
Final Products	Binding and practicable terms	The inner consciousness that shapes the quality of charity

Table 2 shows that the differences between the two are systematic, not sporadic. In each variable, the two occupy almost opposite positions. This is not a difference in degrees, but a difference in direction. It needs to be emphasized that both depart from the same network of teachers and are most likely to read intersecting reference books. Thus, the network factor is not enough to explain such a different end result.

This finding has implications for the thesis of the network of scholars which has been the dominant framework in the study of Islam in the archipelago. The thesis is very strong in explaining why certain ideas of the synthesis of sharia and Sufism, the rejection of extreme wahdat al-wujūd, the emphasis on renewal spread simultaneously in various regions of the archipelago in the eighteenth century. However, this thesis lacks clear force when dealing with the question of why scholars from the same network produce different forms of knowledge. This article proposes that gender functions as a complementary variable, network explains the similarity of orientation, and gender explains the difference in form.

Embedded Interpretation as an Analytical Category

From the above analysis, this article proposes a conceptual category called embedded exegesis. This category refers to the practice of interpreting the Qur'an that takes place in a text that is formally of another genre, and which therefore has a different working logic from stand-alone interpretation.

The embedded tafsir has three characteristics that distinguish it from formal interpretation. First, the embedded tafsir does not pretend to explain the entire verse, but only the part that is relevant to the agenda of the main text, this limitation is not a shortcoming, but a structural character. Second, the direction of the explanation is determined by the purpose of the main text, not by the ururtan mushaf or the internal logic of the verse, third, the standard of success is measured by the extent to which the explanation serves the function of the main text of establishing the law in the book of fiqh, moving charity in the book of suluk not from the completeness of the scope of its interpretation.

The usefulness of this category is practical. So far, the Malay-Jawi scientific corpus of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries consisted mostly of fiqh, monotheism, and Sufism, while the number of formal tafsir books was very limited. If the history of Nusantara tafsir is only written from formal books, then the period that is the most scientifically productive will appear to be a period of poor interpretive activity. The embedded category of tafsir allows this period to be re-read with different results, not a period without interpretation, but with a commentary that is elsewhere.

This category also helps solve the problem of assessment that has been lame. When the book of Sufism is assessed according to the standard of the book of tafsir, the result is always in the form of a list of shortcomings, not systematic, incomplete, and not meeting the requirements of mufasir. Such an assessment is wrong because it measures a text with a purpose that it never had. With the framework of interpretation embedded, the assessment can be directed to a more precise question, how effectively the interpretation serves the function of the text in which it is located.

Research Contributions and Novelties

The novelty of this research can be described in three levels. At the object level, this article is the first attempt as far as the author's search to compare al-Banjari and al-Falimbani specifically in terms of the treatment of Qur'anic verses. Existing comparisons generally place al-Falimbani side by side with Nawawi al-Bantani in the framework of Sufism, a comparison that is chronologically inaccurate given that Nawawi was born almost a century after al-Falimbani. The pairing of al-Banjari with al-Falimbani is much stronger historically because the two are truly contemporaries and share the same network of teachers.

At the methodological level, this article offers a framework of four variables that are gender-neutral. This framework answers an old problem in the comparative study of Nusantara interpretation, namely the absence of an equal benchmark when the objects being compared come from different genres. This framework can be applied to other pairs of figures, for example al-Sinkili with al_raniri, or Daud al_Fathani with Nawawi al-Bantani.

At the theoretical level, the main contribution of this article is the shift in the unit of analysis. The study of Nusantara interpretation has so far placed the book of tafsir as a unit of analysis, so that the corpus that can be studied is very limited. This article proposes the

treatment of verse as a unit of analysis, which opens up the entire malay-jawi scientific corpus as a legitimate area of interpretation study. The consequences of this shift are quite wide, the historical map of the archipelago's interpretation needs to be redrawn, and a number of periods that have been considered quiet of interpretive activities need to be reviewed.

CONCLUSION

This study found that al-Banjari and al-Falimbani differed systematically in their treatment of Qur'anic verses across all the analytical dimensions examined. Al-Banjari primarily employed Qur'anic verses as foundations for legal reasoning, interpreting them in relation to practical legal rulings within the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence (madhhab), with reference to Shafi'i jurists (fuqahāʾ) and local Banjar customary practices. In contrast, al-Falimbani employed Qur'anic verses as guides to successive stages of spiritual development, emphasizing the interpretation of inner spiritual experiences. His approach drew primarily on the intellectual framework of al-Ghazālī and emphasized the pedagogical effectiveness of Qur'anic interpretation in guiding spiritual refinement.

These differences could not be attributed solely to the scholars' intellectual backgrounds, as both were associated with the same scholarly networks in the Ḥaramayn and shared connections to the same Sufi lineage. The study therefore concluded that literary genre served as an important methodological factor shaping their approaches to Qur'anic interpretation. This finding complemented the scholarly network thesis by suggesting that intellectual networks helped explain similarities in scholarly orientation, whereas literary genres contributed to differences in exegetical methods and textual presentation.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The author fully contributes to the formulation of the main idea idea, collects library data, analyzes and interprets the primary text of the figure, and prepares the manuscript. All authors have agreed on the final version of the manuscript.

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