




# Quran interpretation methodology, new media, and ideological contestation of Salafi in Sambas



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This article elaborates on the Salafi youth movement in the village of Sambas. Salafi youth in rural areas adopted the strategy of urban Salafi movements by utilising new media to convey religious messages. Through social media, Salafi youth convey religious understanding in rural areas. This article shows that the presence of Salafis in rural areas has influenced religious dynamics and given rise to contestations of religious ideology among Muslim communities in rural areas. This research article uses qualitative research with a phenomenological approach conducted in several villages in Sambas. The source of data contained in this study was obtained through interviews, observations and documentation from the research team in Sambas, West Kalimantan Province, Indonesia. The data analysis technique uses condensation, that is, all the data obtained without having to reduce it because the research team considers all the data important in this study.

**Contribution:** Scholars in the fields may benefit from the findings of the research, as it provides a new perspective on the Salafist youth movement in rural areas amid religious moderation. Salafist youth in rural areas learn Islam only through YouTube and social media, and this makes fanaticism excessive, which has the effect of blaming each other on traditional Islamic groups in the countryside.

**Keywords:** youth; Salafist movement; quran interpretation methodology; new media; ideological contestation.

## Introduction

The term 'Salafi' has always been associated and synonymous with Wahabi or wahabism to describe a group that upholds the principle that the Quran and the Sunnah are the only references of Muslims in discussing religion (Acim & Sumardi 2023; Malik 2017). Since the mid-1980s, the Salafi proselytising movement has been present in Indonesia, and in the early 1990s, young people from Indonesia learned a lot about Islam through teachers who came from Yemen and were affiliated with Salafists in Saudi Arabia (Hasan 2022; Van Bruinessen 2013). In this modern era, the salafist movement, which originally focused on proselytising, has adapted to social and political circumstances, resulting in the transformation of salafism in Indonesia through charitable and philanthropic endeavors (Jahroni 2020).

Salafism is an Islamic movement whose thinking refers to the system of thought of Salafi scholars. The term 'Salaf' literally has the meaning of the past. Therefore, referring to the history of Islam, the Salaf generation refers to the first generation of Muslims. This period for Salafism is very important because it concerns the issue of understanding and practicing worship (Ahmad, Muniroh & Nurani 2021).

According to Chaplin (2018), the Salafism movement is mostly carried out by young people, especially in urban areas, through religious groups in universities that they do outside of college. The delivery of religious messages is carried out by Salafism through new media such as social media, books, YouTube, clothing sales and others. Of course, their proselytising movement became a religious commodity, especially among urban Muslim youth. The author also found a similar phenomenon in the Salafi community in West Kalimantan where Salafi youth proselytising following the popular culture that is trending among the youth. In addition, the movements carried out also adjust the interests that are loved by the youth, such as sports. For the delivery of religious material presented, they also adjust to the problems of youth life, especially regarding the psychological experiences of the youth. So, the material presented will be easily accepted and in demand by the youth. Not surprisingly, many Salafist youths are included in the Salafism movement and have a role in Salafisation in Indonesia.

The Salafi movement that was originally carried out in urban areas in West Kalimantan, such as Pontianak, has now begun to enter the interior or countryside of West Kalimantan. Many Salafi youth movements in rural areas are carried out by Salafi youth who bring enthusiasm for change to the village. The young men who preach in the countryside mostly gain Salafi understanding when they study in Pontianak, and when they return to the village, they pass on their Salafi understanding to the community. Apart from networking during college, several Salafi youths who preached in the village started to get to know Salafi because they studied religion through YouTube and social media. However, the proselytising delivered by Salafist youth is mostly not accepted by the Sambas community because the proselytising often blames the worship of the community, which is traditional Muslim. Meanwhile, for Salafist youth, the practice of worship carried out by the people in the village is considered heresy and shirk. Salafist youth also criticised religious leaders (*labai*) in rural areas who considered their religious understanding not to be deep, especially with regard to the theological basis for the practice of worship carried out by the people in the village. The influx of Salafist understanding certainly creates verbal conflicts between people who adhere to traditional Islam and Salafist youth. Furthermore, there was a fairly widespread rejection by young people who opposed the presence of Salafism, such as conducting debates on social media and in open forums.

Salafi researchers such as Noorhaidi Hasan (2008), Sunarwoto (Sunarwoto 2021), Muhammad Sani Umar and Mark Woodward (2020), Yanwar Pribadi (2022) and others have discussed a lot of Salafism in Indonesia on the Salafi movement, proselytising, education and understanding Salafism. The study of transnational Islamic movements such as Salafis is important because the development of transnational Islamic movements also affects social, cultural and religious stability in Indonesia, especially in West Kalimantan. Moreover, the methodology of interpretation carried out by the Salafi community is based on the text of the Quran without examining Islam contextually. The call to return to the Quran and Sunnah also affects peace among the people of West Kalimantan, who tend to still maintain local wisdom. This is considered heresy and perversion because mixing local religions and cultures is not true Islam or authentic to the Salafi community.

Although this study has similarities with other studies, the novelty of this study is that it discusses the Salafi movement in rural areas in Sambas Regency, West Kalimantan Province. In the authors' view, research on Salafis in rural West Kalimantan is important because it provides patterns and variants of Islam in Kalimantan. The inclusion of Salafi understanding is inseparable from social and religious conditions in Sambas because the role of religious figures in the Muslim community in Sambas is not too prominent in strengthening the understanding of the values of religious moderation. In addition, most Islamic researchers in Kalimantan, especially in West Kalimantan, discuss more

about the local wisdom of society, ethnicity, post-conflict, Islamic moderation, identity and social change. Of course, the lack of study of contemporary Islam makes religious leaders unaware that transnational Islamic movements are growing stronger in Sambas.

Based on the presentation of the phenomenon of the Salafi religious movement, the research team felt interested in studying Salafi youth, who are a new variant of Islam in Kalimantan, especially in Sambas Regency, West Kalimantan Province. The study of transnational Islamic movements such as Salafi understanding, which is still little done by researchers in West Kalimantan, is an opportunity for future researchers who are interested in transnational Islamic studies in West Kalimantan.

## Research methods

In studying Salafi youth, the research team used qualitative research with a phenomenological approach that aimed to elaborate research findings based on experience, interaction and communication with Salafi youth in rural areas. In making observations, the authors looked at the schedule of Salafi studies in mosques on social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram. Furthermore, the authors followed the study and participated by listening to lectures in the Salafi community. The source of this research data was obtained through interviews with seven Salafi youths, five religious leaders (*labai*) in Sambas, three religious teachers and the Chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council in the Sambas region. The observations made by the research team while participating in Salafi studies in rural mosques in Sambas and the documentation that the authors took related to the Salafi movement, such as papers obtained during Salafi studies. After the data were collected, the research team then carried out data analysis that adjusted all the data obtained without having to reduce the data because the research team considered that all data related to Salafi youth were important for this study. As for the final stage of data in this study, the research team drew conclusions based on the interpretation of the data obtained and presented in this article (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña 2020).

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia Universitas Islam Negeri Mataram (reference no.: 208/Un.12/LP2M/PP.00.9/03/2023).

## Results and discussion

### Salafi methods of interpreting the Qu'ran

In the history of the development of Salafist interpretation using an approach based on the Quran and Sunnah, the main and most authoritative source of the Islamic tradition is 'returning to the Quran and Sunnah', while the method of interpretation is used textually (Duderija 2011). Therefore, Salafism is identified by conservatism in interpreting

religious texts and refers to the understanding of the early generations of Muslims about Islamic texts (Abdul Cader 2015). Salafists see themselves as a group that purifies syncretic practices that persist in the faith from early Islam to the present. Salafists view the uncritical *madzhab* as the cause of the declining economic, social and political conditions in the Muslim world (Hamdeh 2020). In the contemporary era, Salafists are no longer homogeneous because they consist of sub-cultures and orientations from moderate to extreme, but most Salafists agree on the issue of creeds whereas they differ in views on matters of jurisprudence and politics (Ali 2019).

Jonathan Brown (2015) mentions that Salafism has been associated with self-didacticism and states that the Quran is accessible to lay Muslims without the intermediary of scholars. To understand the Quran and Hadith does not require much study because the Prophet Muhammad was sent to show the straight and wise way. Rahmatulloh and Ngazizah (2022) mentioned that the development of Salafist interpretation is inseparable from the emergence of the works of Ibn Taymiyyah, who is considered an authoritative figure in discussing religious issues such as *al-walā' wa al-barā'*. Salafism, in general, interprets the text of the Quran and Hadith through textual interpretation, whereas textual interpretation is used in modern Indonesian political discourse (Woodward 2011). Salafists in religious understanding reject the concept of Western thought because in the view of the Salafists, the prophet Muhammad has given explanations related to the teachings of Islam, for example, in the Hadith, he gives an explanation of the methods that must be followed by Muslims. Therefore, religious practice and knowledge must be based on the literal meaning of the texts of the Quran and Sunnah; so that Salafists reject rationalism in interpreting and understanding religious doctrines (Wahib 2017).

The doctrine of *tawhid* and sunnah emerged through textual interpretation, which had an impact on the concept of *shirk* and *bid'ah*, which is the antithesis of the sunnah so that it became characteristic of the dimension of Islamic purification (Abidin & Hafizah 2019). The concept of *tawhid* is at the core of Salafi *aqidah*, so Muslims should follow the Quran and cling to the purity of the example of the Prophet Muhammad. In maintaining the purity of Islam, Salafists are of the view that beliefs or deeds not commanded by the Quran or the Prophet are heresies that threaten the *tawhid* of Muslims (Wiktorowicz 2006). As a result, the Salafi definition of Islamic texts includes only those that command. This gives the impression that Islam is a religion oriented towards punishment; the Salafists do not mention the texts of encouragement, love, mercy, friendship, kindness, interaction and communication (Wahyudi 2007).

Through the method of interpretation used by Salafists, basic concepts or ideas arise in Salafi's characteristics. Bernard Haykel mentions at least some basic Salafi ideas such as (1) a return to pure Islam exemplified by *al-Salaf al-sālih*; (2) emphasising the teachings of *tawhid* (*rubūbiyya, ulūhiyya and*

*al-asmā' wa al-sifāt*); (3) against *shirk* (polytheism); (4) the Quran, Hadith and the Companions (*ijmā' al-ṣahāba*) are the only legitimate sources in Islamic law; (5) reject all religious innovations from Muslims and (6) advocate literal interpretations of the Quran and Hadith to guide Muslims in their lives (Wahid 2014).

## Islamic moderation and its challenges in Sambas

Sambas is administratively located in West Kalimantan Province, Indonesia, and has a history related to the spread of Islam in Borneo. Currently, 87% of the Sambas community is Muslim, with the majority being Malays (Interview with the Chairman of the Sambas Indonesian Ulema Council, Sumar'in Asmawi, 18 December 2022). The role of Sambas in spreading Islam can be seen in several figures who came from Sambas, such as Sheikh Ahmad Khatib Sambas, who was the founder of the *tharīqat Qadariyah wa Naqshabandiyah* and lived most of his life in the city of Mecca. The students of Sheikh Khatib Sambas who continued their knowledge included Sheikh Nawawi Al-Bantani, Sheikh Kholil Bangkalan, Sheikh Abdul Karim Banten and Sheikh Tolhah Cirebon. His ideas in the field of Islamic scholarship were brought to Indonesia by his students, such as Sheikh Kholil Bangkalan, who spread his scholarship in Java. In addition, another Islamic figure from Sambas is M. Basyuni Imran, who is a scholar who studied in Egypt and studied directly with Muhammad Rashid Rida, who is a figure of Islamic renewal (M.V. Bruinessen 2015; Burhanudin 2021; Mohamed 2021; Mohamed et al. 2018; Van Bruinessen 1999).

In addition to being a religious figure, Basyuni Imran's role as a political figure both locally and nationally is familiar. Even M. Basyuni Imran's scholarship is multidisciplinary, including *fiqh*, *tafsir*, education and astronomy. One of his books is entitled *Molek jawaban: pada mentsabitkan awal bulan dengan kiraan*, which discusses the science of Falaq related to the determination of the beginning of Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr (Basiyuni 'Imran 1938). Judging from his ideas, scholars from Sambas had a role in providing a moderate understanding of Islam to his students (Mahrus, Prasojo & Busro 2020). The religious understanding conveyed teaches the value of moderation to build brotherhood across ethnic, religious and social groups. Evidence of moderate thinking can be found based on manuscripts written by authors such as M. Basyuni Imran (Mahrus et al. 2020). Therefore, the people of West Kalimantan have a tolerance for social interaction that is inseparable from the scientific genealogy derived from Sambas scholars. The application of Islam as *rahmatanlil 'alamin* in West Kalimantan is also seen in educational institutions that implement Islamic moderation and integrate it into education. So it is not surprising that the people of West Kalimantan, especially Sambas, understand Islam, which prioritises unity, peace, tolerance and respect for diversity in social life (Muhtifah et al. 2021).

In practice, the Muslim community in Sambas implements moderate Islamic values, as can be seen from their culture. Moreover, Sambas society is a heterogeneous Muslim society

(multireligious, multicultural and multiethnic) with a moderate understanding of religion. Their understanding of culture and Islam has hybridised, resided and been integrated into the lives of the Sambas people. Culture and Islam have become an ethnic identity, namely the Malay Sambas (Yusriadi 2017). The implementation of Islamic moderation values in the Sambas Malay community has been going on for a long time when political power was controlled by the Sambas sultanate. Ethnic Malay Sambas openly accepted the presence of other ethnicities such as Chinese, Madurese and Javanese who settled in the territory of the Sambas sultanate (Steenbrink 2007). This shows that Muslims in Sambas in practice implement Islamic moderation values that accept cultural, social, ethnic and religious differences. Until now, Sambas Malays have maintained local traditions; even when they settle outside the Sambas area, they still carry out their culture (Suratman & Kurniawan 2019).

However, nowadays, the massive outside culture that cannot be contained because of the intensity of digitalisation that is easily accessible to everyone has also influenced the concept and understanding of Islam, especially among the youth in Sambas. The emergence of conservative Islam that opposes local culture in the Sambas Malay community is a challenge to carrying out Islamic moderation. Through social media, which is influenced by the flow of globalisation and the development of technology without regard to age or social class restrictions, views on religious issues are also diverse. Social media becomes a means to express forms of individual piety and a space for youth to learn Islam. This also affects Sambas youth who follow Salafi understandings that are contrary to the understanding of the Sambas Muslim Community in general. However, Salafi youth still seem to have a place in the social interactions of the Sambas community, but in some villages, they do not have a place in doing Islamic *da'wa*. Through social media platforms such as Facebook, they express their religion and create a Salafi community by conveying Salafi understanding. Ustadz who had a Salafi understanding played a role in the entry of Salafis into rural Sambas, and some made thematic scientific studies in mosques in rural Sambas.

### Media as a tool *da'wa* Salafist youth

Within the Salafi movement, the act of proselytising is closely intertwined with new media platforms, as they provide an accessible means for individuals to access lecture content, religious information, and writings pertaining to Salafist beliefs and understanding (Sorgenfrei 2021). For Salafist youth, new media such as social media is a means of proselytising to show the identity of piety and show loyalty to the Salafi ustadz they admire, both local and national ustadz. In carrying out Salafisation in rural areas, the proselytising aimed at attracting new followers, with their main target being teenagers who are still looking for identity related to religious understanding (Sunesti, Hasan & Azca 2018). Therefore, the movement to spread Salafist understanding through new media shows that Salafi youth

use technology to preach in rural areas have embraced technology and globalisation, incorporating them into their understanding and practices (Chaplin 2018).

The use of new media in proselytising carried out by Salafist youth shows that rural communities have been able to adapt to the currents of massive technological change. The use of new media by Salafist youth is not only practiced by urban Muslims but between urban and rural Muslims today there is something in common. If you look at the phenomenon of the Salafi youth movement, the term urban Muslim in practice preaching is already the same as that of rural Muslims, so it is difficult today to distinguish between the two in carrying out the Salafi proselytising movement (Akmaliah 2020; Makruf & Asrori 2022; Pall & Pereiro 2021). Based on the findings of the research team, in posting pictures and videos on social media, Salafi youths mostly discuss topics related to worship, motivation and encouragement, as well as verses from the Quran and Hadith related to the *Sunnah* of the prophet Muhammad. The Salafist youth movement in proselytising through social media is part of pop culture, which is a form of bottom-up Salafisation in rural areas (Blanc & Roy 2021).

Through social media, it has become a means of disseminating Salafist understanding in rural Sambas. However, traditional Muslim youth who reject Salafist understanding think that the religious messages posted on social media by Salafi youth are only meant to show their individual piety. One of the factors that make the Salafi movement thrive through social media a lot in rural Sambas is that Salafist youth do not get the opportunity to appear in mosques to convey religious messages. Even some of the mosques the research team visited refused to provide opportunities for Salafists to lecture or deliver religious messages in their mosques. For traditional Muslim communities, Salafists do not conform to the Muslim character that exists in Sambas. If it is to be accepted by the rural community in Sambas, then Salafi youth should follow the customs of rural people in worship. So that the Muslim community in the countryside accepts them and considers them to be a part of the Muslim community in the village. However, the research team's search shows that in proselytising, Salafist youth always criticise the worship practices of rural communities in Sambas, which are considered heretical and must be straightened out. Moreover, one of the Salafist youths conveyed to the research team that the good or bad of a person's behaviour can be seen from the practice of worship and practicing the *Sunnah* of the prophet Muhammad. The criticism was conveyed by Salafi youth through social media such as Facebook and Instagram, which resulted in a lot of debate between Salafi youth and traditional Muslim communities in the comments column.

The religious message conveyed through social media is a strategy of Salafist youth in proselytising to display the identity of personal piety by referring to their group as hijrah youth. For Salafist youth who learn religion through social media, it actually leads to a shallowing of religious

understanding so that Salafi youth view worship on a textual basis without paying attention to the social, cultural, economic and educational needs of people in rural areas. Social media serves not only as a means of proselytising for Salafist youth but also has an impact on ideological hybridity in Sambas. In the structure of society, the existence of ideological hybridity certainly influences social changes because they consider that the understanding brought by Salafist youth is incompatible with the characteristics of rural Muslims in Sambas (Bangstad & Linge 2015; Nisa 2018).

### Ideological Contestation: Salafist youth versus traditional Muslim society in Sambas

As the presence of Salafist youth in the countryside has at least given rise to a pattern in the Muslim community in Sambas, the massive Salafist movement carried out by the youth caused verbal conflicts between Muslim communities. However, traditional Muslim communities are not worried in principle about the Salafist movement because their proselytising will not affect the worship practices of traditional Muslim communities. The practice of worship is not just about carrying out religious orders, it has become a habitus that has been recorded in the human subconscious without realising it so that the practice of worship that is carried out is a manifestation of the experience of traditional Muslim communities. Although Salafi youth carried out *da'wah* movements that gave birth to a new structure in rural Muslim communities, it was difficult for them to change the old structure of traditional Muslim communities in Sambas because religious understanding had become habitus. Salafi youth should at least build social relations between individuals and groups, so that their communities remain in Sambas. Social relations can be achieved through interaction, mingling with the community and not blaming community worship procedures (Bourdieu 2010).

In general, traditional Muslim societies accept Salafist youth in social life in rural areas. However, Salafist youth must accept differences in the village so that Salafi youth do not have to criticise the worship practice and religious leaders in the village who practice traditional Islamic worship, which is considered heretical or heresy. Based on the results of the research team's interview, one of the criticisms of traditional Muslim communities in the village against Salafist youth is related to the delivery of their religious message, which considers that the practice of worship in rural communities has never been exemplified by the prophet Muhammad. The practices of worship such as *sya'banan*, *tahlilan*, *buang abu*, *miare*, *tapong tarwar*, grave pilgrimage and others are carried out by traditional rural Muslim communities. Therefore, the religious message conveyed by Salafist youth in rural areas is not in accordance with the characteristics of society, causing disputes between Muslim communities. Although some Salafist youths openly criticised the practice of community worship through social media, this caused debate among the people who saw the post. The criticism made by Salafist youth is precisely a blunder for them because they will be perceived as different people by society. Upon encountering

the Salafist understanding, the authors met several teenagers who, in their embrace of this belief system, compelled their mothers to wear a hijab and mandated their fathers to observe five daily prayers in the mosque.

The understanding of Salafism accepted by teenagers in rural Sambas has an impact on the ongoing process of educational practice in Sambas District. Based on the results of an interview by the research team with a religious teacher at the high school in Sambas, it was stated that because the rise of Salafism in rural areas, it has had an impact on the number of female students who use the veil or niqab. However, teachers do not prohibit the use of veils because it is a right of their students. For religious teachers in high school, it becomes a problem when students have a different view from the religious material delivered by the teacher. In delivering religious material, teachers in high schools are classified as traditional. This is evident through the explanations provided by teachers regarding the Mawlid of Prophet Muhammad, the incorporation of local traditions that have been acculturated with Islam, Fiqh, and other aspects. In this case, learners question the teacher's explanation because it is not in accordance with the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah. The phenomenon is part of the changes in learning brought about by the impact of the Salafi youth movement in the countryside. Moreover, the religious understanding of Salafi youth is textually based on Quranic verses and not contextual. If referring to Bourdieu's (2010) view that the phenomenon is semi-autonomous from economics, art, culture, education and even religion. The semi-autonomous arena certainly has its own patterns and logic and is a battleground where Salafi youth and traditional Muslim communities compete through their capital (Bourdieu 2010). In Pierre Bourdieu's concept of thought, there is the term *doxa*, which is a structure that exists within an established community, such as the practice of worship in traditional Muslim communities. Salafi youths who oppose the practice are heterodox, that is, groups that lack capital that challenge the structure of society and are outside of domination. Some of the capitals that Salafi youth do not have are, namely, Firstly, economic capital, which is economic strength in supporting *da'wa* in rural areas, such as the means of doing *da'wa*. Secondly, social capital, namely Salafi youth who do *da'wa* in rural areas, do not have strong networks with fellow Salafi youth in other regions, such as Pontianak. Salafi youth also do not have networks or support, for example, with local political actors in Sambas. Thirdly, cultural capital, that is, Salafi youth do not have social status capital in promoting themselves in society, such as Hajj degrees or educational degrees, and do not have skills in how to preach to achieve their social status in society. This resulted in the resistance of Salafi youth to the traditional community in rural Sambas through religious messages and opposition to the established structures in the community (Grenfell 2014).

### Conclusion

Salafi youth in the countryside gave a new complexion to the structure of Muslim society in Sambas. However, the Salafi youth movement in rural Sambas Regency is not as developed as it is in urban areas in West Kalimantan. Although in doing

*da'wa* they use new media, that allow them to adapt to social changes. However, Salafi youth in proselytising do not have economic, social and cultural capital, which makes them unable to change the old structure that has been established in the traditional Muslim community in Sambas. Moreover, in the delivery of *da'wa*, they use the methodology of interpreting the Quran textually and not contextually. This is certainly contrary to traditional communities that still maintain local wisdom in religious practice. The delivery of religious messages carried out by Salafi youth only gains religious understanding through social media or from Salafi Ustadz's lectures on YouTube. In addition, the discourse of returning to the Quran and Sunnah seems to corner traditional communities into worship that is not in accordance with religious guidance. This makes the Salafi youth movement for carrying out *da'wa* not develop in the countryside. The cause of religious ideological contestation in rural areas is that in conveying religious messages, Salafi youth do not pay attention to the education, culture, social, economic and religious understanding of rural communities. So that their movement tends to be rejected by the community because it is considered not in accordance with the character of the rural Muslim community in Sambas. Moreover, the issue of worship is a habitus, so it is difficult to change and has been recorded in the collective cognitive history of society.

This study was limited to a descriptive analysis of a limited data set on the Salafi youth movement in rural areas of Sambas District. Thus, further studies are needed to examine the Salafi youth movement in rural areas on a wider scale. The synergy of the roles of religious leaders, communities and religious teachers is a solution to providing religious understanding to youth exposed to Salafi understanding. The role of religious figures is needed in contemporary religious issues that occur in Sambas and Indonesia.

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## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available but are available from the corresponding author, S.S., upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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