

Sufi Hermeneutics and Symbolic Tafsir in the Javanese Manuscript *Hakikate Bismillah*

Hermeneutika Sufistik dan Tafsir Simbolik dalam Naskah Jawa Hakikate Bismillah

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Abstract

The exploration of Qur'anic commentaries rooted in the Islamic traditions of the Nusantara offers valuable insight into the development of a more contextually and spiritually hermeneutic framework. This study focuses on *Hakikate Bismillah*, a Sufi-influenced tafsir manuscript composed in Javanese-Pegon script and originating from a *pesantren* in Lamongan, East Java. Through symbolic and experiential readings, the manuscript articulates a mystical interpretation of the phrase *Bismillāhirrahmānirrahīm*, grounded in inner reflection and spiritual awareness. At the heart of this research is an effort to uncover the esoteric interpretive structure underlying the text and to analyze its synthesis with classical Sufi hermeneutics and Javanese cosmological thought. The study employs a qualitative-descriptive methodology, with content analysis serving as the central analytical instrument. This is complemented by a selective philological examination of the manuscript and informed by key works in the Sufi tradition, particularly those of Ibn 'Arabī, al-Qushayrī, and al-Ghazālī. A comparative lens is also applied to situate *Hakikate Bismillah* within the broader landscape of local Qur'anic exegesis across the Indonesian archipelago. Primary data are sourced from a digitized copy of the manuscript preserved in the British Library collection (EAP061/2/65), alongside secondary literature in both Sufi exegesis and Javanese metaphysical texts. Analysis reveals that the constituent syllables *bis*, *mil*, and *lah* in the word *bismillah* are interpreted as progressive spiritual stations, *īmān* (faith), *taḥwīd* (divine oneness), and *ma'rifah* (gnosis), respectively. These are intricately tied to the concept of *ati*, the Javanese term corresponding to the Arabic *qalb* (spiritual heart), regarded as the inner vessel of divine consciousness. This manuscript thus offers a distinctive model of esoteric tafsir that interlaces Sufi metaphysics, Qur'anic semiotics, and localized spiritual cosmology. The study's principal contribution lies in proposing a hermeneutical paradigm that integrates transcendental insight with cultural particularity, thereby advancing Qur'anic interpretation in directions that are not only interdisciplinary and dialogical, but also deeply transformative.

Keywords: *Esoteric Exegesis, Sufi Hermeneutics, Hakikate Bismillah, Javanese Islam, Manuscript Studies*

Abstrak

Studi terhadap manuskrip tafsir lokal dalam tradisi Islam Nusantara menyimpan potensi kontribusi besar bagi perluasan paradigma tafsir Al-Qur'an yang kontekstual dan spiritual. Penelitian ini mengkaji secara mendalam manuskrip *Hakikate Bismillah*, sebuah naskah tafsir sufistik berbahasa Jawa-Pegon



dari pesantren di Lamongan, yang menafsirkan frasa *Bismillāhirrahmānirrahīm* melalui pendekatan simbolik dan pengalaman ruhani. Tujuan utama penelitian ini adalah mengungkap struktur penafsiran esoterik dalam manuskrip tersebut, serta menganalisis integrasinya dengan khazanah hermeneutika sufi global dan kosmologi spiritual Jawa. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif-deskriptif dengan metode analisis isi (content analysis), ditopang oleh kerangka hermeneutika sufi klasik (Ibn ‘Arabī, al-Qushayrī, al-Ghazālī), studi filologis ringkas terhadap teks naskah, dan komparasi dengan tradisi tafsir lokal Nusantara. Data primer diperoleh dari manuskrip digital yang terarsip di British Library (EAP061/2/65), serta ditunjang dengan sumber sekunder dari literatur tafsir sufi dan kosmologi Jawa. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa unsur *bis*, *mil*, dan *lah* dalam kata *bismillab* ditafsirkan sebagai tahapan iman, tauhid, dan makrifat, yang terhubung dengan konsep *ati* (qalb) sebagai pusat spiritual manusia. Manuskrip ini merepresentasikan model tafsir esoterik yang memadukan pengalaman sufistik, simbolisme Qur’ani, dan ekspresi kebudayaan lokal. Kontribusi utama studi ini terletak pada tawaran kerangka tafsir integratif yang memungkinkan keterhubungan antara dimensi ilahiah dan konteks kultural, sekaligus memperluas horizon kajian tafsir Al-Qur’an ke arah yang lebih interdisipliner, dialogis, dan transformatif.

Kata Kunci: *Tafsir Esoterik, Hermeneutika Sufi, Hakikate Bismillah, Islam Jawa, Manuskrip*

Introduction

Over the past few decades, Qur’anic scholarship in Southeast Asia has witnessed a marked shift in orientation. Moving beyond a dominantly text-centered and normative framework, researchers have increasingly turned their attention to local interpretive traditions infused with cultural depth and spiritual sensibility.¹ Among the most compelling expressions of this turn are Qur’anic commentaries written in regional languages, particularly Javanese, and preserved in the Pegon script.² These texts not only reflect the intellectual legacy of pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), but also reveal how the Qur’an has been engaged through localized symbols, inner experiences, and embodied spiritual practices. Despite their richness, such manuscripts have long remained on the periphery of global Islamic scholarship.³ Frequently regarded as folkloric or peripheral, they are too often overlooked as serious contributions to Qur’anic hermeneutics. Yet, embedded within them are sophisticated exegetical efforts, shaped by and inseparable from the spiritual lifeworlds of their communities. A striking case is the *Hakikate Bismillah* manuscript from Lamongan, which offers a spiritually layered reading of the phrase

1 Lukman Afandi and Monika @ Munirah Abd Razzak, “The Progress of the Quranic Scientific Exegesis in South-East Asia,” October 19, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22321969-12340104>.

2 Supriyanto, Islah Gusmian, and Zaenal Muttaqin, “Cultural Integration in Tafsir Al-Iklil Fi Ma’ani al-Tanzil by Misbah Mustafa within the Context of Javanese Islam,” *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur’an Dan Hadis* 25, no. 2 (October 6, 2024): 392–415, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.v25i2.5538>; Ahmad Baidowi, “Pegon Script Phenomena In The Tradition Of Pesantren’s Qur’anic Commentaries Writing,” *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur’an Dan Hadis* 21, no. 2 (July 2020): 469, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.2020.2102-12>.

3 Annabel Teh Gallop, “The Appreciation and Study of Qur’an Manuscripts from Southeast Asia: Past, Present, and Future,” *Heritage of Nusantara: International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage (e-Journal)*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.31291/HN.V4I2.84>.

bismillāh. Departing from legalistic or grammatical analyses, the text approaches *bismillāh* as a spiritual ascent marked by inner transformation. Written in the idiom of Javanese *pesantren* scholarship, its interpretive mode aligns closely with Sufi *ta'wīl*, evoking parallels with the mystical hermeneutics of figures like Ibn 'Arabī and Sahl al-Tustarī.

The existence of manuscripts such as *Hakikate Bismillah* invites a critical rethinking of prevailing definitions of *tafsir* and the loci of interpretive authority in Qur'anic scholarship. When the meanings of revelation are conveyed through symbolic readings of individual letters and ontologically charged narratives, what emerges is not simply an alternative hermeneutical method, but a distinct epistemological stance, one that privileges intuitive insight and spiritual resonance over formal logic and systematic reasoning. This shift compels us to grapple with several foundational questions: In what ways might symbolic expression serve as a valid mode of theological discourse? Can lived spiritual experience and vernacular linguistic forms be considered credible vehicles for accessing the esoteric dimensions of the Qur'an? And are local, non-Arabic texts like *Hakikate Bismillah* capable of standing alongside canonical commentaries as legitimate contributions to the evolving tradition of Islamic exegesis? These are not peripheral questions; they form the very core of this study's inquiry. Rather than treating *Hakikate Bismillah* as a mere object of philological interest, this research approaches the manuscript as a serious exegetical endeavor, one that springs from deep mystical engagement and is sustained by the intellectual and spiritual legacy of the Javanese *pesantren* milieu.

This study aims to reconstruct the symbolic and esoteric structure underlying the phrase *bismillāh* as interpreted in the *Hakikate Bismillah* manuscript. Grounded in a Sufi hermeneutical framework, the research explores how cosmological imagery, the metaphysical resonance of Arabic letters, and the manuscript's internal symbolic architecture converge to articulate a vision of divine reality and the human spiritual journey. This interpretive strategy is not merely a philosophical lens; it is a deliberate challenge to the notion that *tafsir* must conform to formalist or legalistic paradigms. By placing *Hakikate Bismillah* at the center of analysis, the study contributes to Qur'anic hermeneutics in two key ways. First, it presents a model of Sufi exegesis that is organically rooted in the intellectual and spiritual lifeworld of the Javanese *pesantren* tradition. Second, it argues for the epistemic legitimacy of locally produced texts, long relegated to the margins, as active participants in the broader enterprise of Islamic knowledge production.

Scholarly engagement with local Qur'anic interpretation in Java, especially within the intellectual and spiritual environment of the *pesantren*, has grown

steadily in recent years. Foundational works such as *Tafsir al-Ibriz* by KH. Bisri Mustofa,⁴ *Fayḍ al-Raḥmān* by Šāliḥ Darat,⁵ *Al-Qur'an Suci Basa Jawi* by R.M. Adnan,⁶ and *Tafsir al-Huda* by Bakri Syahid⁷ illustrate how Qur'anic exegesis has been meaningfully interwoven with Javanese cosmology, spiritual ethics, and a culturally embedded vision of social harmony. These commentaries exemplify a deep integration between the Islamic textual tradition and the lived cultural landscape of Javanese Muslims. Some studies, such as Mustaqim's analysis of *Fayḍ al-Raḥmān*, have addressed the isyārī, or symbolic, allusions present in local tafsir.⁸ However, they tend to remain at the surface level of epistemological framing, without delving into the manuscript's deeper symbolic and esoteric structures. Likewise, the works of Gusmian⁹ and Mubasirun¹⁰ have contributed to understanding the socio-cultural dimensions of regional tafsir traditions, yet stop short of unpacking the metaphysical and archetypal dimensions that distinguish texts like *Hakikate Bismillah*. Meanwhile, scholars such as Baidowi,¹¹ Nashoiha, and Widayati¹² have examined the significance of the Pegon script as both a medium of local expression and a vehicle of spiritual transmission. While their work highlights the cultural role of script in vernacular Islamic scholarship, it leaves largely unexamined the hermeneutical depths, the symbolic language, esoteric metaphors, and ontological narratives, that animate the texts written in that script.

Viewed through this lens, *Hakikate Bismillah* occupies a relatively unexplored terrain within Qur'anic exegesis, one that constructs an intricate spiritual cosmology

- 4 Johan Alamsah et al., "Javanese Cultural Locality as Perceived by KH. Bisri Musthofa: An Analysis of Tafsir QS. Luqman: 21," *QOF* 8, no. 1 (May 12, 2024): 21, <https://doi.org/10.30762/qof.v8i1.1392>.
- 5 Zulia Muchofifah, Ahmad Zaidanil Kamil, and Abu Bakar, "Eschatological Visions in Javanese Exegesis: A Study of Sholeh Darat's Tafsir Fayḍ al-Raḥmān," *TAFSE: Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 8, no. 2 (December 30, 2023): 153–75, <https://doi.org/10.22373/tafse.v8i2.20127>.
- 6 Muhamad Dani Habibi et al., "Javanese Cultural Epistemology of Raden Muhammad Adnan's Thoughts in Tafsir Al-Qur'an Suci Basa Jawi," *Fikri: Jurnal Kajian Agama, Sosial Dan Budaya* 8, no. 2 (2023): 209–19, <https://doi.org/10.25217/jf.v8i2.4061>.
- 7 Novita Siswayanti, "Javanese Ethical Values in Tafsir Al-Huda," *Analisa: Journal of Social Science and Religion* 20, no. 2 (January 1, 2013): 207–20, <https://doi.org/10.18784/analisa.v20i2.177>.
- 8 Abdul Mustaqim, "The Epistemology of Javanese Qur'anic Exegesis: A Study of Šāliḥ Darat's Fayḍ al-Raḥmān," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 55, no. 2 (December 15, 2017): 357–90, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2017.552.357-390>.
- 9 Supriyanto, Gusmian, and Muttaqin, "Cultural Integration in Tafsir Al-Iklil Fi Ma'ani al-Tanzil by Misbah Mustafa within the Context of Javanese Islam."
- 10 Mubasirun Mubasirun, "Values of Tepo Seliro in Bakri Syahid's Tafsir al-Huda and Bisri Mustofa's Tafsir al-Ibriz," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 11, no. 2 (December 8, 2021): 351–76, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v11i2.351376>.
- 11 Baidowi, "Pegon Script Phenomena in The Tradition Of Pesantren's Qur'anic Commentaries Writing."
- 12 I Nashoiha and R Widayati, "Form, Consistency and Relevance of Dhahb in Qur'an Manuscript at Museum of Sunan Drajat Lamongan East Java," *Journal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies* 23, no. 2 (2022): 285–310,

through the symbolic function of letters and the soul's experiential progression. To access this dimension, the study employs a Sufi hermeneutical framework as its principal mode of analysis. Foundational thinkers such as Ibn 'Arabī,¹³ al-Qushayrī,¹⁴ and Sahl al-Tustarī are engaged not merely as historical references, but as conceptual interlocutors whose approaches frame Qur'anic interpretation as the unveiling of metaphysical truths embedded within the divine discourse. Key Sufi notions, *wujūd* (being), *maqāmāt* (spiritual stations), and *nūr Muḥammad* (the Muhammadan Light), serve as interpretive tools to examine each constituent of *bismillāh* as simultaneously an ontological gesture and a moment of contemplative awareness. This metaphysical scaffolding enables the esoteric vision of the manuscript to be situated within the broader tradition of Sufi *ta'wīl*, emphasizing inward disclosure over outward exegesis. To complement this mystical paradigm, the study also draws upon Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's contextual hermeneutics, which emphasizes the embeddedness of meaning within cultural and historical contexts.¹⁵

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive methodology, organized into five interrelated analytical stages. First, it undertakes a close reading of the manuscript's narrative and structural features to grasp its internal logic. Second, it identifies symbolic units, linguistic, thematic, and visual, that serve as key interpretive anchors within the text. Third, these symbols are examined through the lens of classical Sufi concepts, allowing for a deeper understanding of their metaphysical resonance. The fourth stage involves intertextual comparison, situating the manuscript within both the classical Sufi exegetical canon and the local tafsir traditions of the Javanese *pesantren*. Finally, the fifth stage engages in a triangulation of meaning by cross-referencing classical sources, cultural context, and the researcher's critical reflection. The primary source for this study is the digitized *Hakikate Bismillah* manuscript, housed in the British Library archive (EAP061/2/65). Supplementary materials include foundational texts in the Sufi interpretive tradition, regional Qur'anic commentaries written in *Pegon* script, and contemporary scholarship on hermeneutics and interpretive theory. This methodological framework is designed to uncover the multilayered meanings embedded in a manuscript that has remained largely outside the purview of mainstream Qur'anic studies. By combining rigorous textual analysis with philosophical and cultural atonement, the study approaches *Hakikate Bismillah*

13 Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futuḥat al-Makiyyah* (Bairut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.); Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī, *Fushus Al-Hikam* (Kairo: Dar Afaq Linnashr wa At-Tawzi', 2016).

14 Abdul Karim ibn Hawazin ibn Abdul Malik ibn Thalhah ibn Muhammad al-Qusyairi, *Lathā'if Al-Isyārāt* (Bairut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2007).

15 Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Maḥmūd Al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsah Fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Bairut: al-Markaz al-Tsaqāfi al-'Arabī, 1990).

not simply as a historical document, but as a site of living interpretation. It seeks to illuminate the manuscript's symbolic depth and spiritual cosmology, while also contributing to broader conversations around interpretive diversity and the place of peripheral texts in the study of sacred scripture.

What sets *Hakikate Bismillah* apart is its richly esoteric reading of the letters in *bismillāh*, each of which is rendered as part of a symbolic cosmology. The letter *bā'* is interpreted as the point of primordial contact with the Divine, an opening through which spiritual consciousness is awakened. The first *sīn* marks the unveiling of hidden realities, signaling the soul's entry into the realm of divine mysteries. Meanwhile, *mīm* is associated with the prophetic light (*nūr*) embedded within the human self, suggesting a latent connection between the seeker and the Muhammadan essence. These symbols do not function as ornamental mysticism; rather, they form a coherent spiritual map, one that invites the reader to experience the Qur'an not as abstract text but as an ontological encounter. In this way, the manuscript acts as a bridge between the metaphysical thought of Ibn 'Arabī and the introspective, practice-based spirituality of the Javanese *pesantren* tradition, which places deep emphasis on *dhikr* (remembrance) and inner witnessing. Through this synthesis, *Hakikate Bismillah* addresses a significant gap in the body of local *tafsir* literature. More than that, it advances a distinct epistemology, one in which divine revelation unfolds as a lived narrative, apprehended through symbolic perception and disciplined spiritual practice.

Manuscript Profile and Contextual Background of *Hakikate Bismillah*

Hakikate Bismillah is a rare manuscript containing an esoteric interpretation of the phrase *Bismillāhirrahmānirrahīm* within the context of Javanese Islamic tradition. The text is composed in Javanese prose using the Arabic-derived Pegon script, and to date, it is known to exist in a single surviving copy. The physical manuscript is housed in the private residence of Raden Edi Santoso, located in Drajat Village, Paciran Subdistrict, Lamongan Regency, East Java. A photocopied version is held by Mr. Rahmat Dasy, a manuscript collector from the nearby village of Kranji within the same region. The manuscript comprises 58 folios and is tentatively dated to the 19th century, based on the distinctive watermark of the paper used. No colophon is present in the text to confirm the exact year of composition. As such, the estimated dating relies primarily on codicological features rather than explicit scribal notation.

A digitized version of the *Hakikate Bismillah* manuscript is preserved under the Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) administered by the British Library,

catalogued under reference number EAP061/2/65. This program is dedicated to the digitization of Islamic manuscripts from various *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) across Indonesia, with *Hakikate Bismillah* included as part of the EAP061/2 collection, comprising manuscripts from Pondok Pesantren Tarbiyya al-Talabah in Kranji. The digital record consists of 17 high-resolution TIFF image files, and access is restricted to academic and research purposes. Official metadata indicates that the manuscript is written in Javanese using the Arabic-*Pegon* script, and is estimated to date from between the 18th and 20th centuries. The digital version is publicly accessible through the British Library's official website: <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP061-2-65>.



Figure 1. First and last folios of the *Hakikate Bismillah* manuscript.

The distinctiveness of *Hakikate Bismillah* lies not merely in its rarity or material form, but in its rich symbolic and spiritual structure that reflects the intellectual and mystical sensibilities of the Javanese *pesantren* tradition. Far from being a mere cultural artifact, the manuscript embodies a living exegetical discourse rooted in local religious life. It interprets sacred verses not primarily through legalistic or grammatical frameworks, but through inner experience, the symbolism of letters, and a nuanced spiritual cosmology. As such, *Hakikate Bismillah* serves as a vital bridge between the classical Islamic intellectual heritage and the lived religious and spiritual practices of the Nusantara. Its presence affirms the continuity of esoteric interpretation within a local idiom, offering valuable insights into how the Qur'an is understood, embodied, and rearticulated within diverse epistemological and cultural landscapes.

Interpretive Structure in *Hakikate Bismillah*

Symbolism and Spiritual Stages in the Exegesis of Bismillah

The *Hakikate Bismillah* manuscript offers a unique expression of esoteric Qur'anic interpretation within the Javanese Islamic tradition. Rather than reading the phrase *Bismillāhirrahmānirrahīm* solely through its linguistic or grammatical structure, the text approaches each of its components as rich spiritual symbols. Take, for example, the interpretation of the syllable *bis*. Instead of treating it simply as a grammatical prefix, the manuscript presents *bis* as a symbolic embodiment of *īmān*, faith. In this reading, saying *bismillah* becomes far more than a habitual or ritual utterance; it is understood as an intentional act of faith that signals the beginning of an inner journey. Here, *īmān* is not limited to intellectual assent or doctrinal belief. It marks the soul's first conscious step toward divine encounter, a movement inward that reflects the heart of esoteric Islamic practice.¹⁶ This reading reframes *bismillah* as an ontological invocation: a call that awakens the soul and initiates its progression toward the Divine.

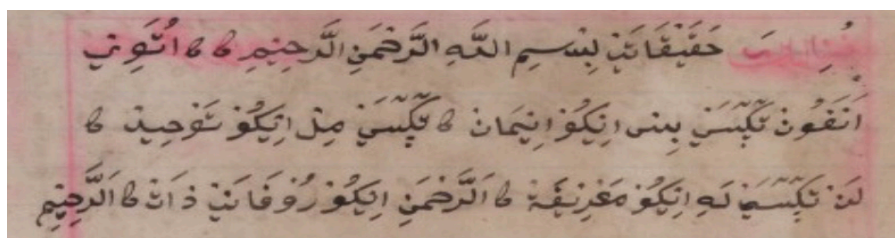
The manuscript's esoteric reading continues with the syllable *mil*, which it interprets as a symbol of *tawhīd*, or divine oneness. Within this interpretive framework, the phrase *bismillah* is not just a ritual formula, it becomes a vessel for conveying core theological principles that link the human soul to its Creator. *Tawhīd*, in this context, is not approached as a distant or abstract concept. Instead, it is treated as an existential truth, one that shapes the believer's moral direction and spiritual orientation in everyday life. By associating *mil* with *tawhīd*, the manuscript calls attention to the importance of conscious intention in the act of saying *bismillah*. The utterance is meant to be rooted in an awareness of one's ontological connection to the Divine. This reading resonates with classical Sufi teachings, which view *tawhīd* not merely as a statement of belief but as an ongoing inner realization, the deep, lived experience of God's singular reality permeating all aspects of existence.¹⁷

The interpretive arc of the manuscript reaches its climax with the final syllable, *lah*, which is linked to *ma'rifah*, the highest spiritual station (*maqām*) in the Sufi path. In this context, *ma'rifah* refers not to intellectual or theoretical knowledge, but to a form of direct, intuitive understanding that emerges through inner purification and the illumination of the heart by divine light. By associating

16 *Hakikate Bismillah*, manuskrip beraksara Arab Pegon berbahasa Jawa, tanpa tanggal (diperkirakan abad ke-19), koleksi pribadi Raden Edi Santoso, Desa Drajat, Paciran, Lamongan, Jawa Timur. Salinan digital tersedia di Endangered Archives Programme, British Library, Ref. EAP061/2/65, diakses 21 Juli 2025, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP061-2-65>

17 *Hakikate Bismillah*, manuskrip beraksara Arab Pegon berbahasa Jawa

lah with *ma'rifah*, the author presents *bismillah* as a symbolic map of the soul's spiritual journey: beginning with *īmān* (faith), passing through *tawhīd* (realization of divine unity), and culminating in *ma'rifah* (gnosis). These three layers form a vertical structure of ascent, representing the deepening of spiritual consciousness. Rather than a routine expression, the recitation of *bismillah* becomes, in this reading, an act of inner transformation, an invocation that mirrors the soul's movement from basic belief toward the highest form of divine recognition. It is a progression that invites the seeker to not only speak the words, but to embody their meaning in lived experience. As the manuscript itself expresses:



“Hakikate Bismillāhirrahmanirrahim, utawi anafun tegese bis iku imān, tegese mil iku tauhid, lan tegese lah iku ma’rifah.”¹⁸

Translated as:

The essence of *Bismillāhirrahmānirrahīm* is that the syllable *bis* signifies faith (*īmān*), *mil* signifies divine unity (*tawhīd*), and *lah* signifies gnosis (*ma’rifah*)

The manuscript also offers a layered interpretation of the two divine names embedded in the phrase *bismillah*, *ar-Rahmān* and *ar-Rahīm*, approaching them through both symbolic and ontological lenses. In this reading, *ar-Rahmān* is understood as *rupane zat*, the outward form or visible manifestation of the Divine Essence. *Ar-Rahīm*, by contrast, is interpreted as *mulyane zat*, referring to the inner nobility or majesty of that same Essence. This distinction suggests that divine mercy unfolds in two interconnected dimensions: a universal mercy that extends to all of creation, and a more intimate, specific mercy reserved for those on the path of faith. Such an interpretation reflects the cosmological richness found in Sufi metaphysics, where divine names function not merely as attributes or linguistic expressions, but as spiritual coordinates, each pointing toward deeper layers of divine reality. In this light,

¹⁸ *Hakikate Bismillah*, manuskrip beraksara Arab Pegon berbahasa Jawa

Hakikate Bismillah presents the names *ar-Rahmān* and *ar-Rahīm* as more than just ritual invocations. They become part of a symbolic map of God's presence, guiding the seeker from verbal utterance to inner realization. The divine names thus serve as both markers of theological meaning and waypoints on the soul's journey toward the knowledge of the Divine.

The interpretive framework laid out in *Hakikate Bismillah* reflects a distinctive form of *ta'wīl*, an esoteric hermeneutic that aligns closely with classical Sufi exegetical traditions, particularly those found in the works of Ibn 'Arabī and Sahl al-Tustarī. The triad of *īmān* (faith), *tawhīd* (divine unity), and *ma'rifah* (gnosis) is not approached as a sequence of abstract theological categories. Instead, it is presented as a series of ontological stages, progressive levels of being through which a *sālik*, or spiritual wayfarer, moves in the pursuit of nearness to the Divine. In this context, the act of interpreting the individual letters of *bismillah* becomes more than an intellectual exercise; it functions as a kind of spiritual architecture, an inner scaffolding that connects the sacred text to the transformative depths of the human soul. The manuscript thus offers a model of symbolic *tafsir* that is both locally rooted and universally resonant. It draws from the metaphysical vision of global Sufism while remaining intimately shaped by the vernacular language, cultural sensibilities, and spiritual worldview of the Javanese *pesantren* tradition.

The Concept of the Heart in the Interpretation of Bismillah

One of the most striking features of the *Hakikate Bismillah* manuscript is its intimate fusion of linguistic symbolism with the Javanese-Islamic concept of *ati*, or the spiritual heart. The manuscript's interpretation of the syllables *bis*, *mil*, and *lah*, as representing *īmān* (faith), *tawhīd* (divine unity), and *ma'rifah* (gnosis), respectively, is not presented in abstraction. Rather, these spiritual stations are situated within the ontological and affective landscape of the heart, which serves as the core locus of divine encounter and inner transformation.

This connection is beautifully articulated in the manuscript's own words:

"Uta'wi imān iku tulise ati, lan tawhīd iku pancere ati, lan ma'rifah iku urubing ati"

or in translation:

"Faith is the inscription upon the heart, tawhīd is the center of the heart, and ma'rifah is the flame of the heart."

This passage reveals a layered symbolic structure that goes beyond doctrinal theology. It reflects a spiritual anthropology in which the heart is not merely a metaphor, but a sacred vessel, where belief is etched, divine unity is anchored, and the light of gnosis is set ablaze. Through this synthesis of linguistic form and interior meaning, the manuscript offers a compelling model of Qur'anic *tafsir* as interiorization, a mode of interpretation deeply grounded in the lived, contemplative practices of the Javanese *pesantren* tradition.

Within this symbolic structure, the *Hakikate Bismillah* manuscript puts forward a powerful epistemological claim: that the heart (*ati*) is the primary site for truly understanding the phrase *bismillāh*. Far from being treated as a mere physical organ, the heart is depicted as the center of spiritual awareness, a place where faith takes root, divine unity is internalized, and deeper meanings are unveiled through lived experience. In this reading, *bismillah* is not simply a verbal formula; it becomes a spiritual map that charts the soul's inward journey. The manuscript's three metaphors, inscription, center, and flame, illustrate a dynamic inner process: beginning with the engraving of belief (*īmān*), moving toward the stabilization of divine unity (*tawḥīd*), and culminating in the ignition of divine light and gnosis (*ma'rifah*). This progression mirrors the Sufi understanding of the heart as articulated by al-Ghazālī, who describes the *qalb* as a *laṭīfah rabbāniyyah*, a subtle, divinely infused faculty that receives knowledge and becomes the site of divine presence.¹⁹

Building upon its layered symbolic hermeneutic, the *Hakikate Bismillah* manuscript further links the two exalted names of God, *ar-Raḥmān* and *ar-Raḥīm*, to aspects of the heart (*ati*). The manuscript states:

“Ar-Raḥmān iku rupane ati, lan Ar-Raḥīm iku mulyane ati,”

translated as:

“Ar-Raḥmān is the form of the heart, and ar-Raḥīm is its nobility.”

This interpretation suggests that divine compassion is not an abstract or distant quality of God, but an immanent reality within the human spiritual interior. The heart, in this framework, becomes the very place where divine mercy is both manifested and personally experienced. *Ar-Raḥmān* represents the outer form, the visible presence, of compassion in the heart, while *ar-Raḥīm* signifies its inner nobility

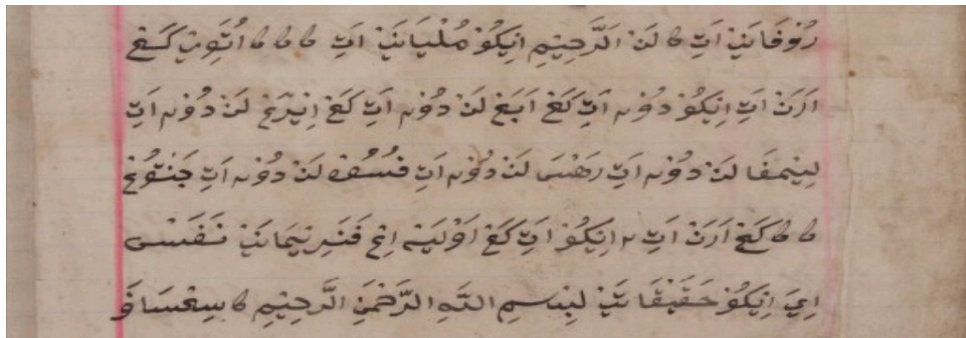
19 Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum Ad-Din* (Bairut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2005). p. 888

or spiritual refinement. This perspective closely aligns with the Sufi concept of *tajalli*, the divine self-disclosure that takes place within the purified heart. In this view, the heart is not merely a metaphor but a sacred vessel, a site where the beauty (*jamāl*) of God is mirrored and divine light is received. It becomes the sanctuary of divine presence, the reflector of spiritual grace, and the medium through which compassion flows into lived experience. Through this exegetical lens, *bismillah* is elevated beyond its function as a devotional phrase. It is framed within a mystical epistemology in which divine love is not remote, but intimately accessible, available to those whose hearts are attuned, open, and spiritually awakened.

The manuscript's emphasis on the heart (*ati*) as the locus of divine knowledge carries significant pedagogical implications, particularly within the context of Javanese *pesantren* education. It invites a model of Qur'anic interpretation that goes beyond formal textual analysis and enters the realm of inner transformation, where knowledge of God is cultivated through love, presence, and direct spiritual witnessing (*mushāhadah*). Within this interpretive framework, *Hakikate Bismillah* is not simply a work of *tafsīr*; it functions as a spiritual guidebook, offering seekers a pathway toward divine intimacy through the experiential depths of the heart. By aligning the symbolic elements of *bismillah* with the interior architecture of the heart, the manuscript moves beyond intellectual exposition. It becomes an invitation to re-center the heart as the primary medium for engaging with the divine names (*asmā'*) and attributes (*sifāt*). This approach foregrounds inner receptivity and personal transformation as essential components of Qur'anic hermeneutics. In doing so, *Hakikate Bismillah* contributes to the emergence of an esoteric exegetical model, one that seamlessly integrates symbolic language, self-awareness, and spiritual experience. It affirms a holistic vision of interpretation in which understanding the Qur'an is inseparable from cultivating the heart as a site of divine encounter.

The Heart (Ati) as the Center of Spiritual Consciousness in Hakikate Bismillah

Among the most compelling aspects of the *Hakikate Bismillah* manuscript is its radical redefinition of the *ati* (heart), which it portrays not as a physical organ, but as the core of spiritual consciousness. The author makes a clear and emphatic distinction between *ati* and any anatomical part of the human body, rejecting common identifications with the red liver (*ati abang*), black liver, spleen, gallbladder, lungs, or even the anatomical heart (*jantung*). This disassociation is expressed with precision in the following passage from the manuscript:



“Utawi kang aran ati iku dudu ati kang abang lan dudu ati kang ireng lan dudu ati limpa lan dudu ati rahsa lan dudu ati fusuḥ lan dudu ati jantung. Kang aran ati iku ati kang oleh ing panarimane nafas iya iku hakikate bismillahirrahmanirrahim.”

Translated as:

“What is called the heart is not the red liver, nor the black liver, nor the spleen, nor the gallbladder, nor the lungs, nor the physical heart. The true heart is the one that receives the breath, and that is the essence of Bismillāhirrahmānirrahīm.”

This passage reveals that the *ati* in question is not physiological, but metaphysical. It refers to the inner faculty that receives the *nafas*, a term which, in Sufi cosmology, denotes the *nafas al-rahmānī* (the Breath of the All-Merciful), the divine effusion that sustains and illuminates the soul. By identifying the heart as the site of this sacred breath, the manuscript elevates the *ati* to the status of a spiritual organ, a vessel of divine reception and the ground of ontological vitality. This understanding not only challenges materialist views of the human self but also reorients the reader toward a profoundly Sufi anthropology in which the heart becomes the seat of divine presence. In this cosmological framework, the entire structure of *bismillah* is anchored within a mystical vision of the soul, wherein each utterance corresponds to a movement of the heart toward the Divine.

This interpretive approach resonates deeply with classical Sufi metaphysics. In *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, al-Ghazālī describes the *qalb* (heart) as a *laṭīfah rabbāniyyah*, a subtle, divine faculty that functions as the mirror of God’s knowledge. Within this framework, the *ati* of *Hakikate Bismillah* is not merely a metaphorical heart, but a vessel for divine reception, a space where transcendence is not only contemplated but experientially unfolded. It serves as a spiritual bridge between the human and the

divine, linking the created soul with the Creator's presence. Al-Qushayrī expands this conception further, describing the heart as the initial domain in which divine presence manifests. He outlines a spiritual progression: beginning with *muḥāḍarah* (divine awareness), deepening into *mukāshafah* (unveiling), and culminating in *mushāhadah* (witnessing).²⁰ In this light, the manuscript's symbolic reading of the letters *bā'*, *sīn*, and *mīm*, as representing *birr* (virtue), *sirr* (inner secret), and *minnah* (divine grace), reinforces the heart's role as a cosmic locus. Here, the heart is not simply the center of emotion; it becomes the stage upon which the soul's ascent to the Divine unfolds. This symbolic architecture strengthens the manuscript's portrayal of *ati* as the existential ground for the seeker's journey toward *ma'rifah* (gnosis) and divine intimacy. It is within the heart that divine meanings descend, infused through the breath of mercy, and rise again as conscious awareness. In this vision, *bismillah* is not merely recited; it is enacted in the soul's unfolding.

Adding further depth to its symbolic framework, the manuscript's concept of *penerimane nafas*, the reception of breath, expands the understanding of *ati* (the heart) as the site of spiritual epiphany. In mystical traditions, breath is never merely a physiological function; it is a sacred symbol, representing the indwelling presence of the Divine within the human soul. *Hakikate Bismillah* identifies this reception of breath as the very *essence* of *bismillah*, suggesting that each utterance of the phrase marks a moment of spiritual contact between the soul and Divine Mercy. Within the framework of spiritual practice, this act may be understood as *contemplative awareness*, a mindful invocation of the Divine Name, harmonized with the rhythm of conscious, reverent breathing.

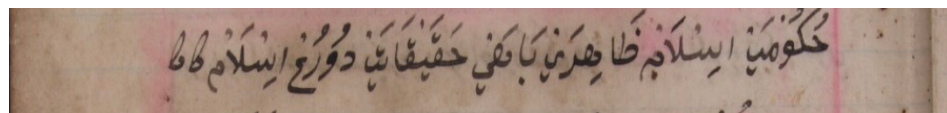
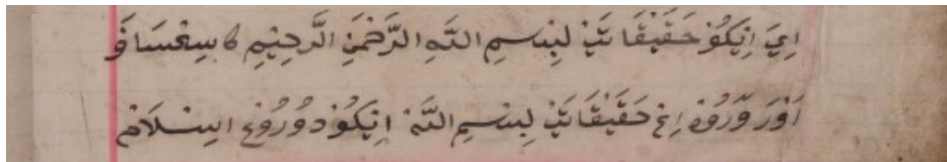
The esoteric interpretation of *ati* (the heart) and the concept of *penerimane nafas* (reception of breath) in *Hakikate Bismillah* opens a vital new horizon in the study of local *tafsir*, particularly within the cultural and pedagogical context of Javanese *pesantren*. By centering inner experience and spiritual awareness, the manuscript offers a hermeneutical model that moves beyond legalistic or formalist approaches to the Qur'an. Instead, it proposes a more intimate, transformative mode of interpretation, one that speaks directly to the soul and fosters ethical self-awareness. This approach holds significant promise for reimagining Islamic education, especially within traditional learning settings. As a spiritually grounded methodology, it encourages personal growth, contemplative reflection, and moral formation, values that are essential to the holistic cultivation of the believer. At the same time, the manuscript's symbolic depth, infused with Javanese cosmological imagery, positions it as a rich source for interreligious and intercultural engagement.

20 Abd Al-Karim Bin Hawazin Al-qashiri Abu Al-Qasim, *Ar-Risalah al-Qusyairiyah* (Kairo: Dar Jawami' al-Kalim, 1990). p. 159

A *tafsir* of *bismillah* that places the heart at the center of divine knowledge can serve as a spiritual bridge across faith traditions. It affirms that locality is not a limitation, but an epistemic gift, a source of insight that enriches the global discourse on the Qur'an.

The Notion of True Islam in Hakikate Bismillah

The concluding section of *Hakikate Bismillah* presents a theologically bold and deeply reflective assertion about the very nature of Islam. In unequivocal terms, the manuscript states:



“Sing sapa ora weruh ing hakikate bismillah iku durung Islam, hukume Islam zahire bae, hakikate durung Islam.”

Translated as:

“Whoever does not understand the inner reality of *bismillah* is not yet truly Muslim; they are Muslim only in outward form, but not in essence.”

This passage advances a profound ontological claim: that authentic Islam requires more than external conformity, it demands inner realization. Within the manuscript's spiritual logic, formal expressions of faith, such as the *shahāda* or the performance of ritual acts, are not dismissed, but they are deemed incomplete unless accompanied by a deep, esoteric understanding of divine meaning. To “know” *bismillah*, in this context, is not merely to recite it, but to enter into its inner reality, to experience the invocation as a transformative encounter with God's mercy, unity, and presence. The manuscript thus redefines Islamic identity not through surface-level markers, but through the heart's receptivity and the soul's participation in the

sacred. This perspective underscores the text's overarching message: that the path to true Islam lies not only in outward observance, but in the inward embodiment of divine truth.

This theological assertion reflects a distinctly Sufi worldview, one that places *ma'rifah*, or intuitive knowledge of God, at the heart of authentic religious life. Within this epistemic and spiritual framework, Islam is not reduced to a legal structure (*shari'ah*) or a system of doctrinal beliefs (*'aqidah*); rather, it is understood as an existential journey toward divine intimacy, realized through the purification of the heart and the cultivation of inner awareness. This understanding echoes the structure of the well-known *hadith of Jibril*, which outlines three ascending dimensions of religious practice: *Islam* (external actions), *imān* (belief or faith), and *ihṣān* (spiritual excellence, defined as worshiping God as though one sees Him).²¹ *Hakikate Bismillah* situates its esoteric reading of *bismillah* precisely within the domain of *ihṣān*. The phrase is not merely a liturgical expression but a spiritual discipline, a gateway to divine presence through which the seeker enters a state of contemplative awareness. In this mode of understanding, *bismillah* becomes more than a recitation; it is a moment of inner witnessing, where the Divine Name activates the heart, aligns the self with divine reality, and ushers the practitioner into a living encounter with God.

Nevertheless, the theological stance advanced in *Hakikate Bismillah* introduces a notable tension when viewed through the lens of normative *kalām* (Islamic theology). Within the framework of *Ahlussunnah wal-Jamā'ah*, a person's status as Muslim is conventionally affirmed through the outward declaration of the *shahāda* and adherence to the foundational practices of Islam, the *arkān al-Islām*. By asserting that one who does not grasp the inner reality of *bismillah* "is not yet Muslim," the manuscript appears to narrow the definition of Islamic identity, privileging an inward, Sufi-oriented path as the sole route to authentic faith. Such a claim may be read as a form of mystical exclusivism, one that, while spiritually profound, places the experiential and esoteric dimensions of Islam above its legal and ritual forms. In doing so, the text risks marginalizing those whose religious life remains situated within the outer frameworks of practice and belief, without necessarily engaging in the depths of inner realization. This theological posture, while coherent within a Sufi paradigm, challenges the broadly inclusive definitions of Muslim identity upheld in classical theology. It raises important questions about the role and limits of esoteric discourse: Can inner realization be upheld as essential without invalidating outward practice? To what extent can mystical experience redefine the boundaries of belonging within the *ummah*?

21 Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Imān, ḥadīth no. 8, ed. Muḥammad Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.).

Despite the theological tension it raises, the manuscript's claim remains significant as an expression of a peripheral hermeneutic voice, one that seeks to redefine the meaning of Islam beyond legal formalism. Within the Javanese *pesantren* tradition, such a narrative serves to reaffirm that Islam is not solely a framework of social rituals or juridical norms, but also a contemplative path that calls for inner cultivation, spiritual discipline, and the deepening of consciousness. By placing *ati* (the heart) and *panarimane nafas* (the reception of divine breath) at the center of religious understanding, *Hakikate Bismillah* articulates a spiritual epistemology rooted not just in doctrinal truth, but in the unveiling (*kashf*) of deeper meanings. Knowledge, in this view, emerges through lived experience and intuitive perception, not merely intellectual affirmation. The manuscript thus reframes Islam as a reflective journey, one that leads toward ontological proximity with the Divine through symbols, breath, and presence. This interpretive model enriches the broader landscape of tafsir by introducing a distinctly Nusantara sensibility, one that is attuned to local cosmologies, symbolic resonance, and the inward dimensions of faith.

Sufi-Javanese Perspectives on the Spiritual Meaning of *Bismillah*

Within the Sufi hermeneutical tradition, esoteric interpretation views the letters, words, and verses of the Qur'an not merely as linguistic constructs, but as spiritual signs, encoded with layers of transcendent meaning.²² This interpretive orientation is grounded in the well-known distinction between *zāhir* (the outward or exoteric) and *bātin* (the inward or esoteric), a dichotomy especially emphasized in traditions such as Ismā'ilism,²³ where the *bātin* is considered the hidden core of revelation, accessible only through inner spiritual experience.²⁴ *Hakikate Bismillah* adopts a similar hermeneutic stance, treating the phrase *bis-mil-lāh* not as a conventional syntactic unit, but as a symbolic roadmap for the soul's ascent toward the Divine. Each syllable is imbued with metaphysical significance and functions as a spiritual marker, unlocked only by a heart that has been purified of its lower inclinations. For instance, the syllable *bis* is interpreted not as a grammatical prefix, but as *īmān* (faith), understood here not in a doctrinal sense, but as the soul's existential readiness to receive *tajalli*, the divine self-disclosure. This interpretive model aligns with the broader esoteric tradition, in which *tafsir* is not limited to rational exposition

22 I F Alatas, "Voicing God's Presence Qur'anic Recitation, Sufi Ontologies, and the Theatro-Graphic Experience," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 14, no. 1 (2024): 47–60, <https://doi.org/10.1086/729499>.

23 M B Khan, "Wilāyah and Ethical Excellence in Islam: An Ismā'īlī Perspective," *Islamic Studies* 62, no. 4 (2023): 493–518, <https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v62i4.2915>.

24 R Ī Mahmut, "The Origin of Esotericism: An Analysis of the Ismaili Esoteric Approach to Qur'anic Interpretation," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu al-Qur'an dan Hadis* 25, no. 1 (2024): 105–20,

but integrates *dhawq* (spiritual taste or intuitive experience) with *kashf* (unveiling). Such an approach demands more than intellectual comprehension; it calls for inner transformation on the part of the reader.

The emphasis on inner receptivity in *Hakikate Bismillah* reflects a hermeneutical orientation that moves beyond the *bayānī* (rhetorical-textual) and *burhānī* (rational-philosophical) modes of interpretation, aligning instead with the *‘irfānī* dimension of Tafser.²⁵ Within the metaphysical framework of Ibn ‘Arabī, *tajallī*, divine self-disclosure, is not something the intellect can grasp on its own. It must be encountered directly by a heart spiritually prepared to receive its illumination. In this context, the syllable *bis* is not simply the grammatical opening of *bismillah*, but a spiritual signal, marking the soul’s readiness to enter the path of divine encounter. This interpretive lens transforms *bismillah* from a familiar devotional phrase into the threshold of *sulūk*, the progressive journey of spiritual realization. It is through this lens that *Hakikate Bismillah* reframes the utterance of *bis* as an act of ontological initiation, not merely verbal piety. A compelling illustration of this is found in Sufi practice, where *bismillah* is used at the beginning of *dhikr*, not as a rote formula, but as a contemplative invocation that attunes the heart to divine presence. The purpose here is not linguistic articulation for its own sake, but alignment of the self with the metaphysical rhythm of the Divine. In privileging this orientation, *Hakikate Bismillah* departs from the literalist or juristic methods of exegesis that dominate much of classical *tafsir*.

The symbolic structure that interprets *bis* as *īmān* (faith), *mil* as *taṭwīd* (divine unity), and *lah* as *ma’rifah* (gnosis) mirrors the spiritual ascent through the *maqāmāt* (stations) in classical Sufi doctrine. This triadic progression, beginning with faith, grounded in the realization of divine oneness, and culminating in the illumination of gnosis, presents a cohesive epistemological synthesis between the metaphysical system of classical *tasawwuf* and the lived spiritual practices of Javanese Islam. In the manuscript’s elegant formulation, “*Īmān iku tulise ati, taṭwīd iku pancere ati, lan ma’rifah iku urubing ati*” (“Faith is the inscription of the heart, *taṭwīd* its axis, and *ma’rifah* its illumination”), we encounter a worldview that locates the heart (*qalb*) as the epicenter of spiritual consciousness. This perspective aligns with the teaching of al-Qushayrī, who describes the heart as the *majlā tajallī*, the locus where divine self-disclosure takes place. Just as *dhikr* in Sufi traditions such as the Qādirīyah or Naqshabandīyah is intended to “open the door of the heart,”²⁶ the invocation of

25 Z Riza, “Esoteric Interpretation of the Quran in ‘The Study Quran’: A New Translation and Commentary (2015) by Seyyed Hossein Nasr et Al.,” *AlBayan* 21, no. 2 (2023): 243–70, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22321969-20230134>.

26 Maula Sari and Marhaban Marhaban, “The Self Purification Through Dhikr in the Perspective of Imam Al-Ghazali,” *Tasfiyah: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 7 (September 25, 2023),

bismillah in *Hakikate Bismillah* is conceptualized as a kind of spiritual password, a sacred key granting access to the innermost sanctuary of the soul. In this light, the act of Qur'anic recitation is reframed: no longer a function of the tongue alone, it becomes an embodied ritual that calls for the full presence, readiness, and receptivity of the heart.

The symbolic architecture of *Hakikate Bismillah* gains further scholarly grounding through the insights of contemporary researchers such as Çalis²⁷ and Mahmut,²⁸ who argue that esoteric exegesis offers unique access to the existential dimensions of the Qur'anic message, dimensions often left unexplored by normative *tafsir*. This interpretive method is not a product of rational construction alone, but emerges from *kashf*,²⁹ the Sufi concept of spiritual unveiling, which denotes a mode of intuitive perception granted through divine grace to hearts refined by sincerity, discipline, and inner devotion. In the Sufi tradition, *kashf* is not considered an imaginative projection or speculative claim; rather, it is an unveiling that surpasses discursive thought, arising not from intellectual reasoning but from spiritual readiness. This epistemological orientation explains why texts like *Hakikate Bismillah* do not conform to the systematic logic of *'ilm al-kalām* (Islamic scholastic theology). Instead, they offer a hermeneutic shaped by inward sensation, symbolic cognition, and contemplative receptivity. For example, the interpretation of *mil* as *tarwīd* is not presented as a theological abstraction, but as an ontological affirmation: that every motion of the servant ultimately reflects the singular action of the Divine. Such interpretations illustrate that local esoteric *tafsir*, far from being anti-rational, represents an alternate epistemic pathway, one that prioritizes inner realization as a profound and legitimate means of engaging with revelation.

The integration of Sufi values with Javanese cosmology in *Hakikate Bismillah* is particularly evident in how *bismillah* is presented, not merely as a liturgical utterance, but as an existential gesture, an embodied expression of being. For many Javanese Muslims, as illustrated in Mustofa's study of *Sūrat Saba'* [34]:13, the interpretation of scripture is deeply embedded in the rhythms of daily life.³⁰ This connection is also evident in communal practices such as *ngaos* (Qur'anic recitation and study), particularly with texts like *Tafsir al-Ibriz*, which serve not only to convey textual

27 Halim Calis, "'Ayn Al-A'Yān: The First Prominent Qur'anic Commentary in Ottoman History," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 7, no. 1 (May 7, 2022): 29–53, <https://doi.org/10.55831/ajis.v7i1.405>.

28 Mahmut, "The Origin of Esotericism: An Analysis of the Ismaili Esoteric Approach to Qur'anic Interpretation."

29 Arni Arni, "KASYF SUFISTIK DALAM PERSPEKTIF ULAMA KOTA BANJARMASIN," *Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Ushuluddin* 8, no. 1 (2009): 71–98, <https://doi.org/10.18592/jiu.v8i1.1359>.

30 Ahmad Mustofa, "The Living QS. Saba': 13 among Javanese Moslem Sculptors," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis* 26, no. 1 (March 2, 2025): 31–52, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.v26i1.5723>.

meaning but to nurture emotional atonement, ethical awareness, and spiritual consciousness within the community.³¹ Within this cultural-theological landscape, *Hakikate Bismillah* affirms that the Divine is not confined to the textual realm alone, but disclosed through everyday acts of devotion and care. The invocation of *bismillah* before engaging in work, teaching children, or planting rice becomes more than custom, it becomes a site of *tajalli*, divine self-disclosure, within the ordinary. These seemingly mundane practices are infused with sacred intentionality, revealing a localized hermeneutic in which revelation is not abstracted from life, but animated within it.

In its final interpretive gesture, the manuscript's reading of the word *lah* as *ma'rifah* marks the climactic point of its symbolic structure. Here, *ma'rifah*, gnosis, is not approached as a theoretical construct or a subject of doctrinal debate. Rather, it is presented as a lived spiritual realization, grounded in everyday practice and inward attentiveness. As the Indonesian scholar Hamka aptly observed, *ma'rifah* is not born from discourse, but arises in the moment of encounter between divine will and the heart's readiness to receive it.³² Within the context of Javanese Islam, *ma'rifah* is often understood as the capacity to perceive divine presence in the ordinary: in labor, in ritual, in human interaction. Thus, when the manuscript declares, "*lan tegese lah iku ma'rifat*" ("and the meaning of *lah* is *ma'rifah*"), it offers more than an interpretation, it extends an invitation. The reader is called not merely to understand a concept intellectually, but to enter a state of inward awareness, where divine reality is encountered through lived experience. This closing moment in the manuscript's hermeneutic structure affirms a deeply rooted local epistemology: that the Qur'an is not only to be read, it is to be embodied. In this vision, sacred text and daily action are not separate realms but mutually enlivening.

The interpretive structure articulated in *Hakikate Bismillah* demonstrates that this manuscript is far more than a commentary on a single Qur'anic phrase, it constitutes a coherent *sulūk*, or spiritual path. The phrase *bismillah* is reimagined as a symbolic ascent through the *maqāmāt* (spiritual stations): *bis* signifies *īmān* (faith), *mil* embodies *tawhīd* (divine unity), and *lah* culminates in *ma'rifah* (gnosis). Together, these elements construct an epistemological framework that fuses the metaphysical insights of classical Sufism with the spiritual sensibilities of Javanese Islam. As Supena has observed, this mode of *tafsir* skillfully negotiates the balance

31 Ubaidillah Baydi and Laitsa Nailul Husna, "Decoding the Cultural Significance of Pengaosan Tafsir Al-Ibri in Kedawung, Mojo, Kediri: An Analysis of Social Meanings," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis* 24, no. 1 (January 31, 2023): 59–78, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.v24i1.3904>.

32 Syafwan Rozi, Nurlizam, and M. Zubir, "The Reception of Hamka's Tafsir Al-Azhar within Social Religious Issues in the Malay World," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis* 25, no. 2 (August 30, 2024): 247–72, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.v25i2.5406>.

between the objectivity of the sacred text and the subjectivity of inner experience, transforming Qur'anic interpretation from abstract discourse into lived spiritual praxis. In this light, *Hakikate Bismillah* is not merely an exegetical text, it is a guide for encountering the Divine. It offers a holistic model of religious understanding that integrates classical *tasawwuf*, local cosmological wisdom, and symbolic hermeneutics into a unified method of spiritual realization. Exegeses like *Hakikate Bismillah* merit inclusion in the wider landscape of global Qur'anic studies. They exemplify a dynamic fusion of text, context, and inner experience, affirming that revelation continues to be interpreted, embodied, and lived in diverse and meaningful ways across cultural and spiritual horizons.³³

Synthesizing Global Dimensions of Sufi Interpretation

This study is rooted in a Sufi hermeneutical framework that aims to unveil the inner dimensions of Qur'anic language through spiritual practices such as *riyādah* (inner discipline), *dhawq* (spiritual taste), and *kashf* (intuitive unveiling). Within this paradigm, meaning is not restricted to the surface of the text; it is regarded as a transcendent reality that originates in Divine Being. As such, interpretation is not simply an intellectual exercise, it is a participatory act that demands the transformation of the self through sustained spiritual refinement. The act of *tafsir* becomes, in this view, a form of spiritual alignment with the Divine, not merely a discursive operation. This model stands in marked contrast to the contextual hermeneutics advanced by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who emphasizes the Qur'an as a socio-cultural text that must be interpreted in light of the historical and linguistic conditions of its readership. While Abu Zayd's approach brings valuable attention to the role of context in meaning-making, it diverges from the ontological and experiential priorities of Sufi exegesis. In the case of *Hakikate Bismillah*, interpretation cannot be reduced to a product of local cultural construction alone. While deeply embedded in Javanese cosmology and *pesantren* tradition, the manuscript's hermeneutics reflect a spiritual articulation inseparable from Sufi metaphysics and the symbolic architecture of the Qur'an.

The symbolic structure developed in the *Hakikate Bismillah* manuscript reveals a striking depth of spiritual meaning by dividing the phrase *Bismillāhirrahmānirrahīm*

33 Ilyas Supena, "Epistemology of Tafsīr, Ta'wīl, and Hermeneutics: Towards an Integrative Approach," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* (Department of Communication and Islamic Broadcasting, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, Islamic University of Walisongo, Semarang, Indonesia) 14, no. 1 (June 2024): 121–36, <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.141.08>.

into three interconnected stages of inner realization: *bis* represents *īmān* (faith), *mil* signifies *taḥwīd* (divine unity), and *lah* culminates in *maʿrifah* (gnosis). Each stage is closely tied to the inner faculty of the heart (*qalb*), described respectively as *tulise ati* (“the inscription of the heart”), *pancere ati* (“the axis of the heart”), and *urubing ati* (“the flame or illumination of the heart”). This interpretive model presents the *basmalah* not as a mere ritual preamble, but as a map of spiritual ascent. It charts a layered journey that begins with the affirmation of faith, deepens into an awareness of divine unity, and ultimately leads to the direct experiential knowledge of God. In doing so, the manuscript transforms the familiar phrase into a profound spiritual architecture, one that links language, consciousness, and revelation in a unified movement toward transcendence.

The symbolic architecture of *Hakikate Bismillah* finds strong resonance within the classical Sufi exegetical tradition, particularly in the thought of Sahl al-Tustarī. In his interpretation of *Bismillah*, Tustarī reads the letters *bāʾ*, *sīn*, and *mīm* as representing key divine attributes: *bāʾ* stands for *bahāʾ* (beauty), *sīn* for *sanāʾ* (radiance or nobility), and *mīm* for *majd* (majesty).³⁴ For Tustarī, these inner meanings are not readily accessible to all; they are unveiled only to those whose hearts have been purified from worldly attachments and who maintain a life of spiritual discipline grounded in lawful practice (*ḥalāl*). This interpretive stance mirrors the foundational message of *Hakikate Bismillah*, which similarly frames the readiness of the heart as essential for receiving divine insight. In both traditions, the invocation of *Bismillah* is far more than a recited phrase, it is a threshold to inner realization, accessible only to those who cultivate the spiritual conditions necessary for unveiling.

Al-Sulamī, in his *Haqqāʾiq al-Taḥṣīr*, offers a similarly symbolic and spiritually relational interpretation of the *basmalah*, reflecting the broader Sufi commitment to esoteric meaning.³⁵ He interprets its individual letters as signs of divine engagement tailored to distinct categories of seekers: the letter *bāʾ* symbolizes *fadl* (divine grace) granted to the souls of prophets; *sīn* denotes *sirr* (divine secret), accessible to the *ʿarifūn* (gnostics); and *mīm* signifies *karāmah* (spiritual gift), bestowed upon the *murīdūn* (aspiring seekers on the path). Through this interpretive lens, the Qurʾan is not approached solely as a textual object but as a living encounter, whose deeper layers unfold in accordance with the seeker’s spiritual readiness and

34 Sahl bin Abdullah al-Tastari, *Tafsir Al-Tastari*, 2nd ed. (Bairut: Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2002).

35 Abu ʿAbdu ar-Rahman Muhammad al-Sulamy, *Haqaʾiq al-Taḥṣīr* (Bairut: Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2001).

relational proximity to the Divine. This hermeneutical structure strongly parallels the progressive symbolism found in *Hakikate Bismillah*, where *īmān* (faith), *tawhīd* (divine unity), and *ma'rifah* (gnosis) are mapped as successive spiritual stations along the soul's journey toward God.

A comparable symbolic sensibility is found in al-Qushayrī's *Lata'if al-Ishārāt*,³⁶ where the *basmalah* is interpreted as a profound ontological declaration. He writes: "With the letter *bā'*, all things become manifest; nothing exists except through Him, from Him, and returning to Him." In this reading, the letters of *Bismillah* are not merely linguistic elements, but metaphysical signposts that point to the all-encompassing reality of the Divine. For al-Qushayrī, access to these deeper meanings is not granted through rational analysis alone, but through a heart purified of distractions and a soul cultivated in spiritual vigilance. Within this framework, epistemological tools such as *dhawq* (spiritual taste) and *kashf* (unveiling) become indispensable for disclosing the inner dimensions of revelation. These faculties, cultivated through Sufi practice, allow the seeker to penetrate the outer shell of the text and encounter its hidden divine core. This principle is strongly echoed in *Hakikate Bismillah*, which likewise asserts that true understanding of the sacred requires more than intellect, it demands spiritual receptivity, inner purification, and the readiness to witness.

Ibn 'Arabī interprets the structure of *Bismillah* as a dynamic process of *tajallī* (divine self-disclosure), unfolding across three ontological levels. In his metaphysical schema, *Allah* signifies the *Dhāt Mu'laq*, the Absolute Essence beyond all attributes; *al-Rahmān* represents the universal emanation through which existence comes into being; and *al-Rahīm* denotes the particularized outpouring of divine mercy directed specifically toward creation, especially humanity.³⁷ This triadic progression mirrors the spiritual trajectory articulated in *Hakikate Bismillah*, from *īmān* (faith), to *tawhīd* (divine unity), and ultimately to *ma'rifah* (gnosis), demonstrating a profound synthesis of mysticism and metaphysical philosophy in the articulation of esoteric meaning. Both frameworks embody the Sufi hermeneutical principle of layered meaning (*zāhir* and *bātin*), where the outward structure of the Qur'anic text conceals inner realities that become intelligible only through spiritual refinement and insight. In this view, language is not a boundary but a veil, behind which the

36 al-Qusyairi, *Lathā'if Al-Isyārāt*.

37 Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, *Tafsir Al-Qur'an al-Karim* (Bairut: Dar al-Yaqzah al-Arabiyyah, 1968).

transcendent reveals itself to the prepared heart.

This triadic vision is further reinforced by al-Ghazālī in *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, where he interprets the three divine names in *Bismillah* as markers of descending levels of divine manifestation. He explains that the Name *Allah* is the locus of the radiance of the Divine Essence (*Dhāt*), *al-Rahmān* corresponds to the site of God's attribute of mercy (*sifah*), and *al-Rahīm* represents the expression of that mercy in action (*'amal*).³⁸ This structure reflects a hierarchical model of *tajallī* (divine self-disclosure): beginning with the Essence (*Dhāt*), proceeding through the Attributes (*sifāt*), and culminating in the Acts (*af'āl*). Such a metaphysical schema closely parallels the spiritual framework articulated in *Hakikate Bismillah*, which traces the soul's journey through the ascending stages of *īmān* (faith), *tawhīd* (divine unity), and *ma'rifah* (gnosis).

Comparable esoteric traditions appear across diverse Islamic contexts, reflecting a shared Sufi emphasis on the heart as the locus of divine knowledge. Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī,³⁹ for example, insists that the purification of the heart is an essential precondition for attaining *ma'rifah*, a view that closely aligns with the concept of *urubing ati* (the illumination of the heart) in *Hakikate Bismillah*. In the Ottoman context, Ismā'īl Haqqī al-Burūsawī offers a similarly symbolic reading in his *Rūh al-Bayān*, where he interprets the *basmalah* through an *ishārī* (allusive) lens, as a stream of divine light that flows from God into the human heart. This interpretive approach strongly resonates with *Hakikate Bismillah*, which likewise understands *bismillah* not as a formulaic utterance, but as a conduit for *tajallī* (divine self-disclosure) directed inwardly, toward the receptive soul.⁴⁰ These transregional parallels suggest that *Hakikate Bismillah*, though firmly rooted in the Javanese *pesantren* tradition, participates in a much broader esoteric discourse. Its symbolic structure, spiritual epistemology, and emphasis on the heart as a medium of revelation reveal deep affinities with classical and post-classical Sufi thought across the Islamic world.

In the Indonesian context, Shaykh Sholeh Darat of 19th-century Java offers a compelling example of esoteric Qur'anic interpretation in his influential work *Fayd*

38 Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Jawahir Al-Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (Bairut: Dar Ihya' al-'Ulum, 1985).

39 Abū Ṭālib Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Makkī, *Qūt Al-Qulūb Fī Mu'āmalat al-Ḥabīb Wa Wasf Ṭarīq al-Murīd Ilā Maqbūl al-Ḥabīb* (Bairut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2005).

40 Ismā'īl Haqqī ibn Muṣṭafā al-Būrūsawī, *Rūh Al-Bayān Fī Tafṣīr al-Qur'ān* (Bairut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyyah, 2018).

al-Rahmān. His reading of the *basmalah* presents a layered model of *tajalli* (divine self-disclosure), progressing from the *Dhāt* (Divine Essence), to the attribute of *jalāl* (Majesty, associated with *al-Rahmān*), and finally to *jamāl* (Beauty, signified by *al-Rahīm*).⁴¹ In this cosmological schema, the letter *bā'* is interpreted as a symbol of human existence, while the hidden *alif*, silent but implied, is understood as the mark of the transcendent Divine Essence (*Dhāt Ilāhiyyah*). This interpretive mode reflects a distinctly '*irfānī*' epistemology, privileging spiritual intuition and unveiling over purely rational analysis, an approach that resonates closely with the hermeneutical vision of *Hakikate Bismillah*. Sholeh Darat constructs an intricate spiritual cosmology encompassing the *asmā'* (Divine Names), *dhāt* (Essence), *jalāl* (Majesty), and *jamāl* (Beauty), as well as four ontological layers: *ulūhiyyah* (divinity), *rūhiyyah* (spiritual reality), *tubūhiyyah* (vegetative life), and *hayawāniyyah* (animal life).⁴² Through this ontological and symbolic mapping, he affirms that the true meaning of *bismillah* cannot be grasped apart from inner spiritual experience.

Thus, the symbolic structure in *Hakikate Bismillah* is not an isolated interpretive construct, but part of a broader Sufi hermeneutical tradition that transcends both geography and genre. What distinguishes this tradition is its adaptability: rather than simply replicating external models, it rearticulates them through a localized idiom shaped by Javanese cultural and spiritual values. This indigenized adaptation reflects a dynamic synthesis, one in which global Sufi epistemologies are refracted through the lens of regional cosmologies, producing a form of *tafsir* that is both universal in aspiration and culturally rooted in expression. This interpretive dynamic is also visible in texts such as *Miftāh al-Mannān*, which advances the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being) in a manner that echoes the metaphysical teachings of Hamzah Fansuri. In such works, God is not merely the originator of existence, but its only true reality; all created forms are understood as manifestations of His essence. This ontological vision finds a close parallel in *Hakikate Bismillah*, where each element of the *basmalah* encodes metaphysical insight, mapping the intimate relationship between the Divine and the cosmos through symbolic language.

Ultimately, *Hakikate Bismillah* serves as compelling evidence that Islamic spirituality can integrate harmoniously with local culture without compromising

41 KH Sholeh Darat, *Faidl Al-Rahman Fi Tarjuman Tafsir Kalam Malik al-Dayyan* (Singapura: Haji Muhammad Amin, n.d.).

42 H Calis, "The Theoretical Foundations of Contextual Interpretation of the Qur'an in Islamic Theological Schools and Philosophical Sufism," *Religions* 13, no. 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020188>.

its metaphysical depth. Its triadic structure of *īmān–taḥwīd–maʿrifah*, its symbolic reading of Qurʾanic letters, its grounding in *kashf* (unveiling) and *dhawq* (spiritual taste), and its expression through the Javanese Pegon script all demonstrate that divine meaning can be both articulated and lived within specific cultural worlds. This form of *tafsir* not only contributes richly to the broader corpus of Qurʾanic exegesis, but also presents Islam as a spiritual, contextual, and inclusive path, one that speaks through and with culture, rather than above it.

At the same time, the insights of contemporary scholars like Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd remain vital for expanding the interpretive horizon. His contextual hermeneutics remind us that the meaning of the Qurʾan is not static or self-contained, but emerges through the dynamic interplay between *nass* (the revealed text), the reader's worldview, and the socio-cultural environment. In this view, interpretation is not a final destination but an evolving negotiation, a dialectical process shaped by the tensions and affinities between revelation and lived experience.

Conclusion

This study finds that the *Hakikate Bismillah* manuscript offers a sophisticated and symbolically rich model of Sufi *tafsir*, in which the phrase *Bismillāhirrahmānirrahīm* is interpreted as a spiritual ascent through three key stages: *bis* symbolizes *īmān* (faith), *mil* represents *taḥwīd* (divine unity), and *lah* signifies *maʿrifah* (gnosis). These elements are not treated as abstract theological ideas, but as experiential stations integrally connected to the *ati* (heart), which is portrayed as the center of spiritual consciousness, capable of receiving divine light through the sacred breath of God's mercy.

Rather than offering a phonetic or grammatical analysis, the manuscript constructs a structured spiritual *maqām* (pathway), resonant with the mystical paradigms of Sufi authorities such as Ibn ʿArabī, al-Qushayrī, and al-Tustarī. In this view, Qurʾanic understanding is not merely an intellectual activity but a spiritual undertaking grounded in *kashf* (unveiling), *dhawq* (spiritual taste), and *riyāḍah* (discipline). Through its Sufi hermeneutical orientation, enriched by local cosmological symbolism, *Hakikate Bismillah* effectively bridges the global legacy of Sufi exegesis with the culturally embedded spiritual life of the Javanese *pesantren*.

This manuscript challenges the perception of Javanese-Pegon texts as static cultural relics. Instead, it reveals them as dynamic, living expressions of Islamic spirituality, embodying the intellectual, emotional, and metaphysical knowledge of the Nusantara Muslim community. Symbolic formulations such as “*īmān iku tulise ati*” (“faith is the inscription of the heart”) and “*ma’rifah iku urubing ati*” (“gnosis is the flame of the heart”) articulate a deeply integrative epistemology, where Sufi metaphysics is fused with local cosmological insight. In contrast to dominant formalist and textualist models, *Hakikate Bismillah* expands the horizon of Qur’anic interpretation by offering a context-sensitive, esoteric, and transformative approach. It affirms the epistemic legitimacy of local *tafsir* traditions and positions them as vital contributors to the broader intellectual and spiritual heritage of Islamic exegesis.

Nevertheless, this study acknowledges certain limitations. First, it has not fully examined the manuscript’s reception within contemporary *pesantren* communities, nor the extent of its pedagogical or devotional influence. Second, the analysis is largely framed through a Sufi lens; future research could incorporate alternative methodologies, including gender-based analysis, Islamic ecotheology, or progressive hermeneutics, to broaden interpretive perspectives. Further studies might also explore other indigenous *tafsir* manuscripts across the Nusantara, fostering deeper engagement with local Islamic knowledge systems and their relevance within contemporary Qur’anic hermeneutics.

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Author Contributions

This article was collaboratively written by four authors, each responsible for specific tasks: developing the research idea, conducting philological analysis, interpreting the esoteric meaning, and finalizing the manuscript. All authors approved the final version for publication.

Data Availability Statement

Primary data come from the digitized *Hakikate Bismillah* manuscript (British Library, archive code EAP061/2/65), accessible at: <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP061-2-65>. Secondary data were obtained from referenced literature.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest that could influence the outcomes or interpretations of this research.

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