



LIVING SUNNAH: A CONCEPTUAL STUDY AND A PRACTICAL MODEL OF THE PROPHET'S SUNNAH IN THE LIFE OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

Ubaidullah¹

¹Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar, Indonesia

Correspondence Email: ubaidullah.indo@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Living Sunnah refers to the practice of the Prophet Muhammad's saw traditions that are not limited to textual hadith, but are embodied in the lived traditions of Muslim communities in various aspects of life. This study aims to explore the meaning of Living Sunnah and to identify its models of application in society. Using a descriptive qualitative approach and literature review as the main method, the findings show that Living Sunnah is manifested in three main models: written tradition, oral tradition, and practical tradition. The written tradition appears in the form of hadith quotations displayed in public spaces; the oral tradition is transmitted through teaching in Islamic boarding school, religious gatherings, and families; while the practical tradition is expressed through acts of worship and religious culture such as *aqiqah*, reciting *shalawat*, and other social religious practices. These three models demonstrate how the Sunnah of the Prophet saw continues to live, be transmitted, and contextualized within the lives of Muslims. This study recommends a critical understanding of Living Sunnah to ensure its alignment with authentic hadith.

Keywords: Living sunnah; hadith; written tradition; oral tradition; practical tradition

1. INTRODUCTION

The Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) occupies a central position in Islamic epistemology as the second primary source of religious authority after the Qur'an. It functions not only as a normative guide for legal rulings (*ahkām*), but also as a comprehensive moral and ethical framework that shapes Muslim belief, conduct, and social interaction. Classical Islamic scholarship has traditionally approached the Sunnah through textual analysis of hadith literature, focusing on issues of authenticity, transmission, and legal interpretation. While this textual orientation has been indispensable for preserving the integrity of the Sunnah, it does not fully capture the ways in which prophetic teachings are lived, embodied, and continuously reproduced within Muslim communities. Beyond its textual form, the Sunnah exists as a social reality that manifests in everyday religious practices, communal rituals, ethical norms, and cultural expressions. This lived dimension of prophetic teachings is commonly conceptualized in contemporary Islamic studies as Living Sunnah or Living Hadith. Living Sunnah refers to the ongoing presence of the Prophet's teachings as they are practiced, transmitted, and interpreted

within specific social and cultural contexts. It highlights the dynamic relationship between religious texts and lived experiences, emphasizing that the Sunnah is not merely preserved in books but also enacted in the daily lives of believers.

Although the terminology of Living Sunnah has emerged relatively recently within academic discourse, the phenomenon itself is deeply rooted in Islamic history. Prior to the systematic codification of hadith, early Muslim communities relied heavily on communal practice as a primary reference for understanding the Prophet's teachings. The practices of the people of Medina, for example, were regarded by many classical scholars as an authoritative embodiment of the Sunnah, reflecting the collective memory of the Prophet's companions and their immediate successors. This historical precedent demonstrates that lived practice has long functioned as a legitimate mode of transmitting and interpreting the Sunnah alongside textual sources. In contemporary Muslim societies, Living Sunnah manifests in various domains, including ritual worship, social etiquette, family life, educational practices, commemoration of Islamic holy days, and local customs inspired by prophetic values. These practices often reflect a process of contextualization, in which universal Islamic principles are expressed through culturally specific forms. As such, Living Sunnah illustrates the flexibility and adaptability of Islamic teachings, enabling them to remain meaningful and relevant across diverse historical periods and geographical settings. This adaptability underscores the dynamic character of Islam as a lived religion, capable of engaging constructively with changing social realities without losing its normative foundations.

However, the growing recognition of Living Sunnah also raises important epistemological and methodological challenges. Not all practices that are socially accepted or religiously revered within Muslim communities can be directly traced to authentic prophetic traditions. In many cases, local customs, pre-Islamic traditions, or socio-cultural innovations become intertwined with religious practice and are subsequently legitimized as Sunnah without adequate scholarly scrutiny. This blurring of boundaries between authentic Sunnah and inherited tradition poses a significant risk to the integrity of prophetic teachings, particularly when cultural practices are uncritically elevated to religious norms. Furthermore, contemporary discourse on Living Sunnah often oscillates between two extremes: uncritical acceptance of all inherited practices as religiously valid, and rigid textualism that dismisses lived traditions altogether. Both approaches are problematic. The former risks diluting the Sunnah by detaching it from its authentic textual foundations, while the latter overlooks the historical and social processes through which Islamic teachings have been meaningfully practiced and transmitted. A balanced scholarly approach is therefore required, one that integrates rigorous hadith criticism with contextual and sociological analysis.

In this regard, the study of Living Sunnah occupies a strategic position within interdisciplinary Islamic studies, intersecting with hadith studies, anthropology of religion, sociology, and cultural studies. By examining how prophetic teachings are interpreted and enacted in real-life contexts, Living Sunnah studies contribute to a deeper understanding of the interaction between normative religious texts and lived religious realities. Such an approach not only enriches academic discourse but also provides practical guidance for Muslim communities seeking to practice the Sunnah in a manner that is both authentic and contextually meaningful. Despite its growing prominence, research on Living Sunnah remains uneven, particularly in terms of methodological clarity and theoretical grounding. Many existing studies are descriptive in nature and lack clear criteria for evaluating the authenticity and legitimacy of lived practices. There is therefore a pressing need for research that systematically conceptualizes Living Sunnah, distinguishes it from mere cultural tradition, and offers analytical frameworks for assessing its conformity with prophetic teachings. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to contribute to the

ongoing scholarly conversation by critically examining the concept of Living Sunnah within contemporary Islamic discourse. Specifically, the study aims to (1) clarify the conceptual boundaries of Living Sunnah, (2) analyze selected examples of its manifestation in Muslim communities, and (3) propose methodological principles for applying Living Sunnah in a way that remains faithful to authentic hadith while accommodating socio-cultural diversity. By doing so, this study aspires to strengthen the understanding and practice of the Sunnah as a living, dynamic, and ethically grounded tradition in modern Muslim life.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using a descriptive–analytical approach to examine the concept and manifestations of Living Sunnah in Muslim societies. A qualitative method was considered appropriate because the study sought to explore meanings, interpretations, and patterns of religious practice rather than to measure phenomena quantitatively. The descriptive aspect of the research aimed to present a systematic account of Living Sunnah as reflected in religious texts and scholarly discourse, while the analytical dimension focused on critically examining its conceptual foundations, modes of transmission, and socio-religious relevance. The research was conducted as library-based research, which enabled an in-depth engagement with classical Islamic sources alongside contemporary academic literature addressing the Sunnah as a lived religious phenomenon.

The primary data of this study consisted of hadith texts drawn from authoritative classical compilations such as *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, and other widely recognized hadith collections that document the sayings, practices, and tacit approvals of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). These texts were treated as normative references for identifying prophetic practices that later became embodied in communal traditions and socio-religious practices. The secondary data were obtained from contemporary books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and academic studies that discussed the concept of Living Sunnah and related themes, including hadith sciences, Islamic intellectual history, sociology of religion, and the transmission of Islamic culture within society. These sources provided theoretical frameworks and critical perspectives necessary for contextualizing Living Sunnah within modern scholarly discourse.

Data collection was carried out through systematic literature review and documentation. Relevant sources were identified, selected, and examined based on their academic credibility, authority, and relevance to the research focus. Classical hadith texts were reviewed to extract examples of prophetic practices that demonstrated continuity within lived religious traditions, while contemporary scholarly works were analyzed to identify prevailing interpretations, debates, and conceptual models of Living Sunnah. This process allowed for an integrative reading that connected normative textual foundations with broader socio-cultural and theoretical perspectives.

The data were analyzed qualitatively through content analysis combined with a phenomenological approach. Content analysis was employed to examine textual materials systematically, identify recurring themes, and classify manifestations of Living Sunnah into three principal models: written tradition, oral tradition, and practical tradition. Each model was analyzed in terms of its form, scope, continuity, and function within the socio-religious life of Muslim communities. The phenomenological approach was applied to understand Living Sunnah as a lived religious experience, emphasizing how individuals and communities perceived, internalized, and assigned meaning to Sunnah-based practices in their everyday lives. Through this combined

analytical framework, the study sought to capture both the normative dimension of the Sunnah and its experiential realization within society.

To ensure analytical rigor and trustworthiness, the study applied source triangulation by comparing classical hadith texts with contemporary scholarly interpretations. Cross-referencing among primary and secondary sources was conducted to maintain consistency and depth of analysis, while careful attention was given to the authenticity and scholarly acceptance of the hadith materials examined. Although the study was limited to library-based research and did not involve direct field observation, this methodological approach was considered suitable for achieving the research objectives, as it allowed for a comprehensive conceptual and methodological examination of Living Sunnah that may serve as a foundation for future empirical and ethnographic investigations.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Meaning of living Sunnah

There is a difference of opinion among hadith scholars regarding the definitions of the terms Sunnah and hadith, particularly between earlier scholars (*mutaqaddimīn*) and later scholars (*muta'akhkhi'n*). The *mutaqaddimīn* explain that hadith encompasses all statements, actions, and tacit approvals of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, that are attributed to him after he was appointed as a prophet. Sunnah, according to them, is everything that originates from the Prophet without being bound to a specific time limit. In contrast, the *muta'akhkhi'n* view the terms hadith and Sunnah as having the same meaning, covering the Prophet's utterances, deeds, and approvals.

After the Prophet's passing, his Sunnah remained an ideal to be followed by subsequent Muslim generations, interpreted based on their new needs and new subject matter. This interpretation is continuous and progressive.

The form and practice of the science of living hadith do not differ from those of living Qur'an. Therefore, in terms of definition, both share a common scope of meaning. The sciences of living Qur'an and living hadith are disciplines concerning the Qur'an and hadith that are alive, or the sciences of bringing the Qur'an and hadith to life whether materially or naturally, practically on a personal level, or practically on a communal level, both cognitively and non-cognitively. They can also be defined as the disciplines examining phenomena of the Qur'an and hadith in the midst of human life.

Furthermore, living hadith is defined as a phenomenon observable in Muslim society; thus the study of living hadith falls into the category of socio-religious phenomena.

The word living comes from English, meaning alive. Hence, living Sunnah is a Sunnah that is alive. It is not understood merely as written texts or reports recorded in hadith books, but also as traditions transmitted from generation to generation in the form of concrete practices. This phenomenon shows how the Prophet's teachings become part of the culture and social behavior of Muslims, so that the Sunnah remains relevant across time.

Contemporary hadith studies scholars explain that Living Sunnah is a religious practice rooted in the Prophet's Sunnah and continually revitalized by the community. However, in its development, some of these practices may become mixed with local elements, hence requiring investigation into their conformity with authentic hadith.

One example of a Living Sunnah still strongly practiced by Muslims is the habit of reciting salawat upon the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him—that is, uttering prayers for Allah to grant mercy and blessings to him. This practice is not only performed individually but also becomes a collective tradition in various religious activities such as after the call to prayer, in study assemblies, during the commemoration of the Prophet's birth, or in daily dhikr routines. The Prophet himself encouraged his community to increase salawat, as stated in a hadith meaning:

Whoever sends blessings upon me once, Allah will send blessings upon him ten times.

This practice of reciting salawat demonstrates how the Prophet's Sunnah remains alive within society and becomes a form of love for him passed down through generations.

Thus, living hadith comprises writings, recitations, and practices carried out by a particular community as an effort to apply the Prophet's hadith.

Models of living Sunnah

Living hadith can be distinguished into three main forms: the written tradition, the oral tradition, and the practice tradition. The three are often interrelated, though each has its own characteristics. The practice tradition tends to be more dominant in the life of Muslims because hadith teachings are frequently realized directly through various religious and social activities. This makes the influence of the practice tradition stronger than that of the written and oral traditions.

1. Written tradition

The writing tradition plays a very important role in the development of living hadith. Writing functions not only as a means of scholarly documentation but also as a medium for disseminating the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, in daily life. This tradition is visible in various forms of expressions or hadith quotations that are often displayed in strategic locations such as mosques, Islamic boarding schools, Islamic schools, and even public transport such as buses and city minibuses. In Indonesia, the tradition of writing hadith excerpts on banners, signboards, or religious posters has become an inseparable part of the effort to enliven the values of Sunnah within society.

For example, many mosques post hadiths about the virtue of congregational prayer or the etiquette of maintaining cleanliness. One hadith that is often written and used as a reminder for Muslims is the Prophet's saying:

الطُّهُورُ شَطْرُ الْإِيمَانِ (Cleanliness is part of faith)

However, not everything displayed is actually from the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. Some are not hadith but are regarded by the community as hadith. For instance, sayings like إيمان من النظافة, intended to create an atmosphere of comfort and cleanliness, may circulate, yet they are not authentic hadith.

2. Oral tradition

The next model of Living Hadith is the oral tradition, which refers to the transmission of the Prophet's Sunnah through verbal instruction, recitation, and habitual teaching within Muslim communities. In the context of Living Hadith, the oral tradition develops organically alongside everyday religious practices and plays a crucial role in sustaining the continuity of prophetic teachings. Through sermons, study circles, religious advice, and informal instruction, hadith are

not only conveyed as texts but also as lived guidance that shapes patterns of worship and religious behavior.

One illustrative example of the oral tradition is the recitation performed during the Friday dawn (*ṣubḥ*) prayer. In many Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), particularly those led by scholars who are *ḥāfiẓ* of the Qur'an, the Friday dawn prayer is commonly performed for a longer duration. This is due to the imam's recitation of two relatively long surahs, namely Sūrat al-Sajdah (Qur'an 32) in the first rak'ah and Sūrat al-Insān (Qur'an 76) in the second rak'ah. This practice is rooted in a prophetic hadith narrated by Abū Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him), who reported that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) used to recite *Alif Lām Mīm Tanzīl* and *Hal Atā 'alā al-Insān* during the Friday dawn prayer. Within pesantren environments, this hadith is frequently taught orally, often accompanied by explanations of the virtues and wisdom of reciting these surahs on Friday morning.

Through repeated oral instruction and communal practice, this Sunnah becomes internalized and sustained across generations. Students learn not only the textual basis of the hadith but also its practical implementation through direct participation in congregational prayer. Over time, the practice becomes a distinctive feature of religious life within these communities, illustrating how oral transmission serves as an effective medium for preserving and actualizing the Prophet's Sunnah.

Beyond congregational prayer, the oral tradition of Living Hadith is also evident in the habituation of specific supplications and remembrance (dhikr) recitations taught directly in study gatherings or within family settings. Parents and teachers commonly transmit morning and evening dhikr based on prophetic hadith through repetition and memorization, rather than through formal textual study. These recitations are often introduced at an early age and reinforced through daily practice, enabling the Sunnah to be deeply embedded in personal and communal religious routines.

Such oral traditions demonstrate that the Prophet's Sunnah remains alive not only through written hadith compilations but also through continuous verbal transmission and embodied worship practices. By functioning as a bridge between textual knowledge and lived religious experience, the oral tradition plays a vital role in ensuring that hadith continue to inform and shape Muslim devotional life across generations.

3. Practice tradition

The final model of Living Hadith is the practice tradition, namely the embodiment of the Prophet's Sunnah that is directly implemented in the daily life of Muslim communities. Among the various forms of Living Sunnah, the practice tradition represents the most concrete and observable manifestation of the continuity of hadith across generations. Through repeated and communal enactment, prophetic teachings move beyond textual transmission and become an integral part of social and religious life, shaping communal identity and religious consciousness.

One prominent example of the practice tradition is the implementation of the Sunnah of *'aqīqah*, which is based on prophetic hadith concerning the birth of a child. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) stated: *"Every child is in pledge by his 'aqīqah, which is sacrificed for him on the seventh day; his hair is shaved, and he is given a name."* This hadith serves as the primary normative foundation for the tradition of slaughtering animals in conjunction with the birth of a child and demonstrates how a prophetic instruction has been preserved and enacted through lived religious practice.

In Indonesian Muslim society, the Sunnah of *'aqīqah* is commonly realized by slaughtering two goats for a male child and one goat for a female child, in accordance with widely accepted hadith interpretations. The meat is typically cooked and distributed to neighbors, relatives, and the poor, thereby reinforcing social solidarity and communal generosity alongside ritual observance. In addition to the sacrificial act, the baby's hair is shaved and the child is formally given a name on the seventh day, reflecting close adherence to the guidance articulated in the hadith. These practices are often accompanied by communal prayers and expressions of gratitude, further embedding the Sunnah within the social fabric of the community.

This practice of *'aqīqah* exemplifies Living Hadith in its practical form, as the Prophet's teachings continue to be implemented in a concrete, visible, and socially meaningful manner. It illustrates how hadith function not only as textual references but also as living guidelines that inform religious behavior and social interaction. At the same time, the persistence of such practices underscores the importance of ongoing scholarly engagement to ensure that their implementation remains consistent with authentic prophetic teachings. Through this lens, the practice tradition of Living Hadith demonstrates both the vitality of the Sunnah and the need for critical awareness in its application within contemporary Muslim life.

4. CONCLUSION

Living Sunnah refers to the understanding and practice of the Prophet Muhammad's Sunnah that extends beyond its preservation in hadith texts and continues to exist as a living tradition within the culture, habits, and everyday practices of Muslim societies. In this perspective, the Sunnah is not only transmitted through written documentation but is also embodied in social behavior, communal rituals, and inherited religious customs. The concept of Living Sunnah highlights the dynamic interaction between normative prophetic teachings and the socio-cultural contexts in which Muslims live, demonstrating that the Sunnah functions as both a textual authority and a lived religious reality.

Living Sunnah may be analytically categorized into three main models: written tradition, oral tradition, and practice tradition. The written tradition refers to the preservation and dissemination of the Sunnah through written forms that are visible and accessible in daily life. This includes the habit of documenting hadith in books, manuscripts, pamphlets, and digital media, as well as displaying selected hadith quotations in mosques, Islamic schools, public institutions, and private homes. Such practices function not only as reminders of the Prophet's teachings but also as educational tools that reinforce moral values and religious awareness within the community.

The oral tradition of Living Sunnah takes place through verbal transmission and direct instruction. This model is evident in the teaching of hadith during religious study gatherings (*majelis ta'lim*), in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), and within family settings where parents and elders transmit prophetic teachings to younger generations. Through sermons, religious advice, storytelling, and daily guidance, the Sunnah is continuously communicated and internalized. Oral transmission plays a crucial role in sustaining the continuity of the Sunnah, particularly in communities where personal interaction and communal learning remain central to religious education.

The practice tradition represents the most tangible form of Living Sunnah, as it is realized through the concrete implementation of the Prophet's teachings in everyday religious and social life. This includes acts of worship such as congregational prayer, devotional recitations rooted in

classical Islamic tradition, and social-religious practices such as performing ‘aqīqah for newborn children. Through repeated practice, these Sunnah-based actions become ingrained in communal life, shaping patterns of religious behavior and collective identity. The practice tradition demonstrates how the Sunnah is not merely known or taught, but actively lived and embodied by Muslims.

Taken together, these three models illustrate that the Prophet’s Sunnah remains relevant and continues to be practiced across generations in diverse Muslim societies. However, the persistence of Living Sunnah also necessitates ongoing critical reflection to ensure that its manifestations remain aligned with authentic hadith and sound scholarly principles. Without such reflection, there is a risk that cultural accretions may be uncritically equated with prophetic teachings. Therefore, the study of Living Sunnah is essential not only to appreciate its vitality and continuity, but also to safeguard the authenticity and integrity of the Sunnah in contemporary Muslim life.

REFERENCES

- Abu Dawud al-Tayalisi. (1999). *Musnad Abu Dawud al-Tayalisi*. Dar Hajr: Cairo.
- Hasbillah, A. ‘U. (2019). *Ilmu Living Quran-Hadits: Ontologi, Epistemologi, dan Aksiologi*. Maktabah Darus-Sunnah: Ciputat.
- al-Bukhari, M. bin I. (1993). *Shahih al-Bukhari*. Dar Ibn Katsir & Dar al-Yamamah: Damascus.
- Hasanah, N. (2017). *Memahami Hadis Secara Tekstual dan Kontekstual: Studi atas Pemikiran Muhammad Abû al-Laits al-Khair Âbâdî*. UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta: Jakarta.
- Imam Muslim. (1955). *Shahih Muslim*. Maṭba‘ah ‘Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa Syirkah: Cairo.
- Anwar, M. K. (2015). *Living Hadis*. Vol. 12, No. 1.
- Romdloni. (2019). *Living Sunnah: Metode Memahami Sunnah yang Hidup*. Universitas Nurul Huda OKU Timur: OKU Timur.
- Salih, S. (1988). *Ulam al-Hadis wa Mustalahuhu*. Dar al-Ilm Lil Malyin: Beirut.
- Shamsu, L. S., & Salleh, N. M. (2021). *Menelaah Konsep Living Hadis dan Kaitannya dengan Ihyā’ al-Sunnah: Satu Tinjauan Literatur*. Vol. 11, No. 21.
- Siregar, I. (2022). *Studi Living Hadis: Dilihat dari Perkembangan dan Metodologi*. Vol. 5, No. 1.
- Darmalaksana, W. (2021). *Living Sunnah: Kebahagiaan Religius Menyambut Kelahiran Sang Bayi*. UIN Sunan Gunung Djati: Bandung.